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WILLIE NELSON

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HOW HE CHANGED MUSIC FOREVER

+

ALL ABOUT FARM AID

the King *of* Country

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The country icon got formal for the cover shoot to his 2009 album *American Classic*. He wrote his first No. 1 hit song, "Hello Walls," in 1961.

MUSIC SPOTLIGHT™ COLLECTOR'S EDITION

WILLIE NELSON

The King of Country

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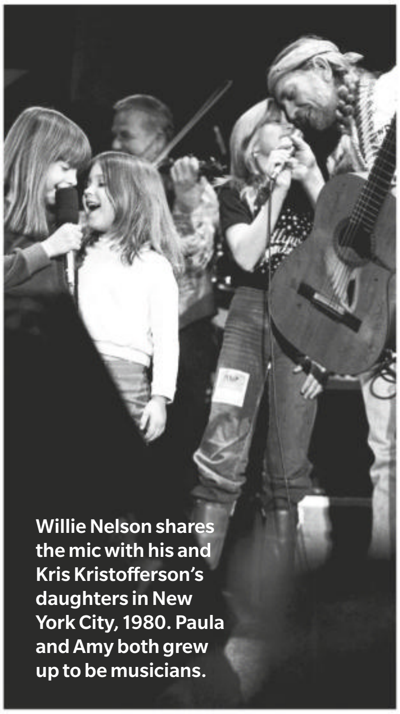

Willie Nelson shares the mic with his and Kris Kristofferson's daughters in New York City, 1980. Paula and Amy both grew up to be musicians.

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Test your smarts on the Red Headed Stranger.

The singer plays his trusty guitar, Trigger, in the spring of 1978. Nelson's Martin acoustic has been in service for over 50 years and is signed by a host of his closest friends.

Howdy, Stranger

No one in country music compares to Willie Nelson. In fact, no one anywhere does. Long since outgrowing his chosen genre, “The Red Headed Stranger” is a unique cultural force who, after seven decades in the business, shows no signs of slowing down.

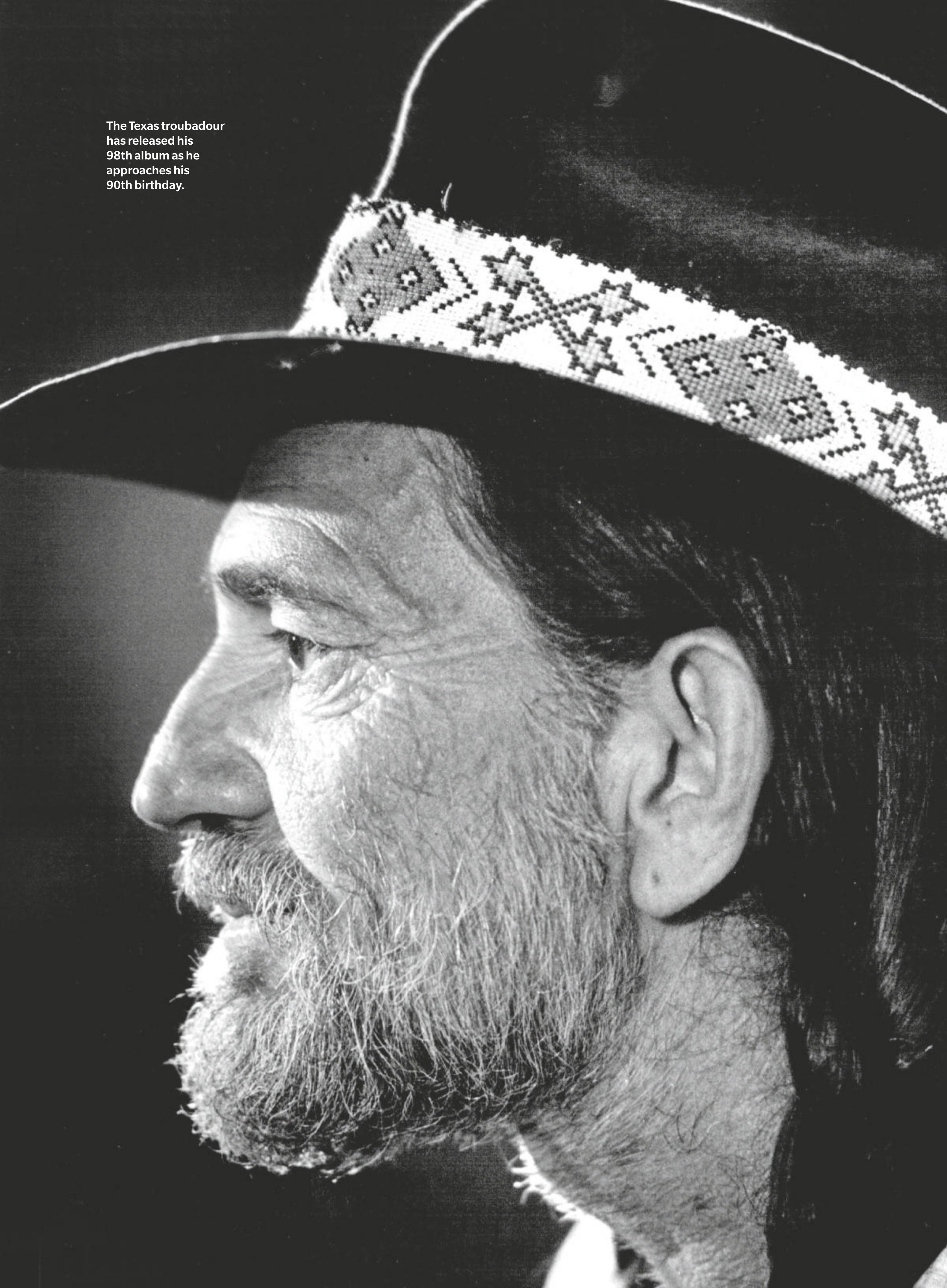
The list of accolades is incomparable: 25 No. 1 singles on the country music charts, three platinum albums, 15 Grammys, induction into the Country Music Hall of Fame and recipient of the Kennedy Center Honors and George Gershwin Prize for Popular Song, to name a few. He’s an actor, a pot-smoking mogul and a best-selling author. But a rundown of Nelson’s accomplishments only paints a small part of the picture.

More than any other artist in country music, Nelson carried the “three chords and the truth” motto over to the mainstream in ways it may never otherwise have done. He penned genre-defining hits like “Crazy” long before achieving success as one of Nashville’s outlaws, a new breed of stars who redefined country cool with long hair and blue jeans.

There’s no limit to Nelson’s artistry, nor to whom he welcomes to the party. He’s championed farmers and LGBTQ rights, and railed against mass incarceration for marijuana and family separations at the U.S.-Mexico border. He’s collaborated with country icons from Waylon Jennings to Dolly Parton to Loretta Lynn, and pop stars like Ray Charles and Sheryl Crow. Even as he turns 90, he’s kept up a nonstop touring schedule, with annual festivals in his home state of Texas, including Luck Reunion on his own ranch.

The past few years have tested Nelson’s tireless optimism like never before. Already taken out of his concert-playing element by the COVID-19 pandemic, he said goodbye to one of his oldest, dearest friends, drummer Paul English, who died in the winter of 2020. Then came an even greater loss: that of his older sister, Bobbie, in March 2022. He responded with his 13th book, *Me and Paul: Untold Stories of Fabled Friendship,* a tribute to English, last September.

As Nelson gears up to celebrate his 90th birthday with a star-studded concert this April, he swears there’s no big secret to his remarkable drive. “Oh, you know,” he told E! News in 2023, of how he lives: “One day at a time.”



The Texas troubadour has released his 98th album as he approaches his 90th birthday.

All Of Me

BACKSTAGE MEMORIES AND INTIMATE MOMENTS FROM THE WILD LIFE OF COUNTRY MUSIC ICON WILLIE NELSON.

RED HEADED STRANGER
WILLIE NELSON
WILLIE
NELS

1

2

3

4

5

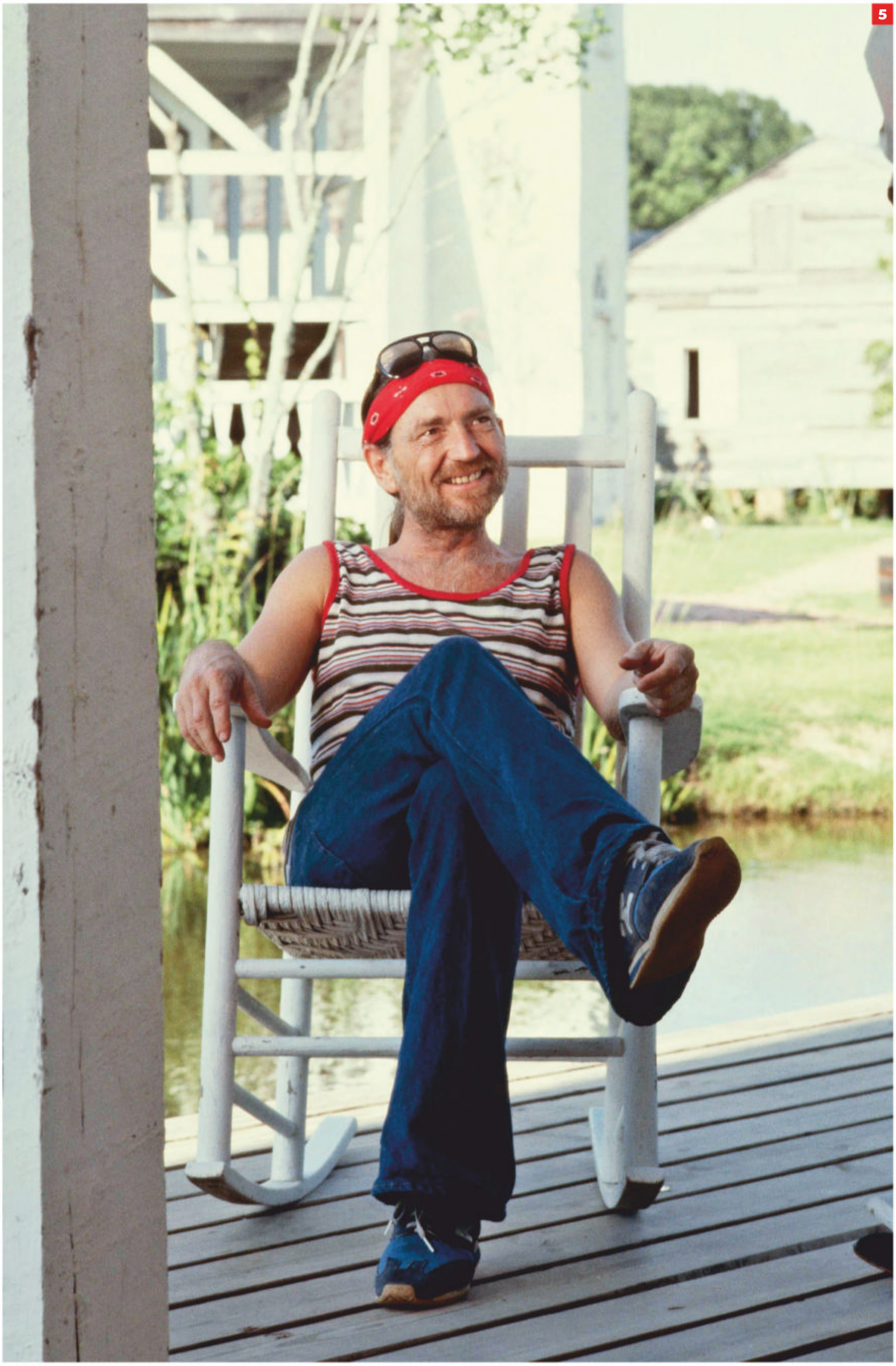
1. Willie Nelson pays a visit to Peaches Records in Atlanta on Oct. 28, 1975, and leaves his hand and footprints in the concrete while promoting his first platinum album, *Red Headed Stranger*. He later became the first honoree on the Texas Walk of Stars in Austin, Texas, in June 1987. **2.** Daughter Amy gives Nelson a kiss alongside older sister Paula in Las Vegas on June 18, 1980. The children of his third marriage—to wife Connie Koepke—both girls have gone on to work in the music business, with Paula as a SiriusXM Satellite Radio show host and Amy as a member of the band Folk Uke. **3.** Nelson appeared on the pilot episode of PBS' long-running television series *Austin City Limits*, which first aired in 1975. Here he is on April 20, 2012, at the unveiling of his statue in front of the show's current home, ACL Live at the Moody Theater, located on Willie Nelson Boulevard in downtown Austin. **4.** Nelson and Koepke celebrate his Album of the Year and Single Record of the Year wins during the Academy of Country Music Awards at Knott's Berry Farm in Buena Park, California, on May 9, 1983. The awards came courtesy of *Always on My Mind* and its namesake song. **5.** A smiling Nelson goes for a dip in 1978. Though known to many as an avid pot smoker, he long ago gave up alcohol and cigarettes and maintains an active lifestyle of biking, golfing and swimming. He refers to his second home on the Hawaiian island of Maui as his "hospital zone."

1
WILLIE NELSON
Singer, Songwriter
Author
CAMPAIGN 2008
FOR PRESIDENT
ENGLISH
VICE
Wake me
when it's over

2

3

4



1. Though avowedly nonpolitical in his live shows—"I'm just an old redneck from Texas who ain't a Democrat or Republican," he's said—Nelson has long been held up as a dream candidate by his fans. Here he is signing a tongue-in-cheek campaign poster, with longtime drummer Paul English listed as his running mate, during the Democratic National Convention in Denver on Aug. 25, 2008. **2.** Merle Haggard shares the stage with Nelson at Starwood Amphitheatre in Antioch, Tennessee, on Aug. 26, 1988. The two country legends recorded three albums together and were close friends until Haggard's death in 2016. **3.** Nelson gets a photo op with Kermit the Frog during the Songwriters Hall of Fame induction ceremony in New York City on June 14, 2001. He later reunited with Kermit for an episode of *The Muppets* TV show in 2016. **4.** The would-be city slicker lounges in a convertible on the set of the music video for "Maria (Shut Up and Kiss Me)" at Red Rock West Saloon in New York City. The video, released in 2002, co-stars actor Luke Wilson, Matchbox 20 singer Rob Thomas and Spanish model Almudena Fernández. **5.** During the filming of a TV interview with CBS, Nelson relaxes in a rocking chair in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, on April 29, 1978. The appearance took place days after his 45th birthday and just as his *Stardust* LP began a record 10-year run on the country chart.

Around the World in 90 Years

WILLIE NELSON PREPARES TO CELEBRATE HIS BIG BIRTHDAY LIKE ONLY HE KNOWS HOW.

Ninety years is a long time. In Willie Nelson's case, it's long enough to pack in several lifetimes of adventure—and to cheat death on more than a few occasions. Plane crashes, house fires, a collapsed lung—Nelson's been through them all, and lived to tell the tale. So why not live it up? As the "Red Headed Stranger" prepares to embark on his 10th decade, he's doing so the only way he knows how: with a huge party and, naturally, a concert. "I can't think of a better way to spend my 90th birthday than being surrounded by family, friends and of course the fans who made this all possible," Nelson (who was born on April 29, 1933) said this past January as he announced plans for "Long Story Short," his star-studded birthday bash.

The two-day gala, slated to take place at the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles on April 29 and 30, reads like a who's who of artists from all corners of his life. On the lineup: rock legend and Farm Aid co-founder Neil Young; rapper and toke buddy Snoop Dogg; current country trendsetters Kacey Musgraves and Margo Price; and, of course, his sons, Lukas and Micah Nelson, the latter appearing with his band Particle Kid.

Few people could even dream of getting up onstage at Nelson's age, much less with the energy he consistently delivers. Sure, he's taken to performing from a chair in recent

Performing at the annual Luck Reunion festival in March 2022, Willie Nelson has shown little sign of slowing down with age.

Shania Twain accepts the Best Country Album Grammy for Nelson in February (top); Neil Young (below, right) will play at his birthday gig.

years, but playing music keeps the icon going. Being forced to take a break during COVID-19 lockdowns only drove that point home to him. "Every day, it was more and more like a prison sentence," Nelson told *The New York Times Magazine* in 2022, referring to his forced pandemic sabbatical.

For 90 years—nearly 70 of those as a full-time singer and songwriter—Nelson has never slowed down, never stopped moving, never stopped creating. Even when the pandemic kept him from his beloved travels, it did little to diminish his output. In the three years since the Texan had to call off touring in March 2020, having just played to a crowd of 70,000 at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, he's released three studio albums and published two books. The most recent of those albums, *I Don't Know a Thing About Love*—a tribute to country songwriting legend Harlan Howard, released on March 3—marked his 73rd as a solo artist.

The honors have continued to roll in, too. In February, Nelson collected two trophies at the Grammy awards, including Best Country Album for 2022's *A Beautiful Time*, beating out present-day hitmakers Luke Combs, Miranda Lambert, Ashley McBryde and Maren Morris. The other, Best Country Solo Performance, was for a heartfelt cover of his late friend Billy Joe Shaver's "Live Forever." Those wins came on the heels of the news that the country star was at long last nominated for the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, joining a list that included longtime friend and collaborator Sheryl Crow. There's also an acclaimed new documentary, a five-part series called *Willie Nelson & Family*, which made its debut at Sundance Film Festival in January. Directed by Thom Zimny and Oren Moverman, it's an intimate deep-dive into the singer's remarkable life—"a rich life of beauty and struggle," as Zimny told *Billboard*—featuring extended interviews with Nelson, his family and friends. "That's what makes him inspiring to me," son Lukas says in the film, "his resilience in the face of adversity."

Resilience is one thing. Simply having a good time is another. "I wish I could tell you," Nelson told E! News earlier this year, when asked about the secret to his longevity. "I really don't know, except that I really do believe in imagining what you want to do and let it happen. And that's my full philosophy, and it's working."

SING ON, SISTER

Older sibling Bobbie Nelson passed away in 2022.

For all of Willie Nelson's innumerable travels, he's found himself navigating unfamiliar territory this past year: On March 10, 2022, he lost his big sister, Bobbie, at 91.

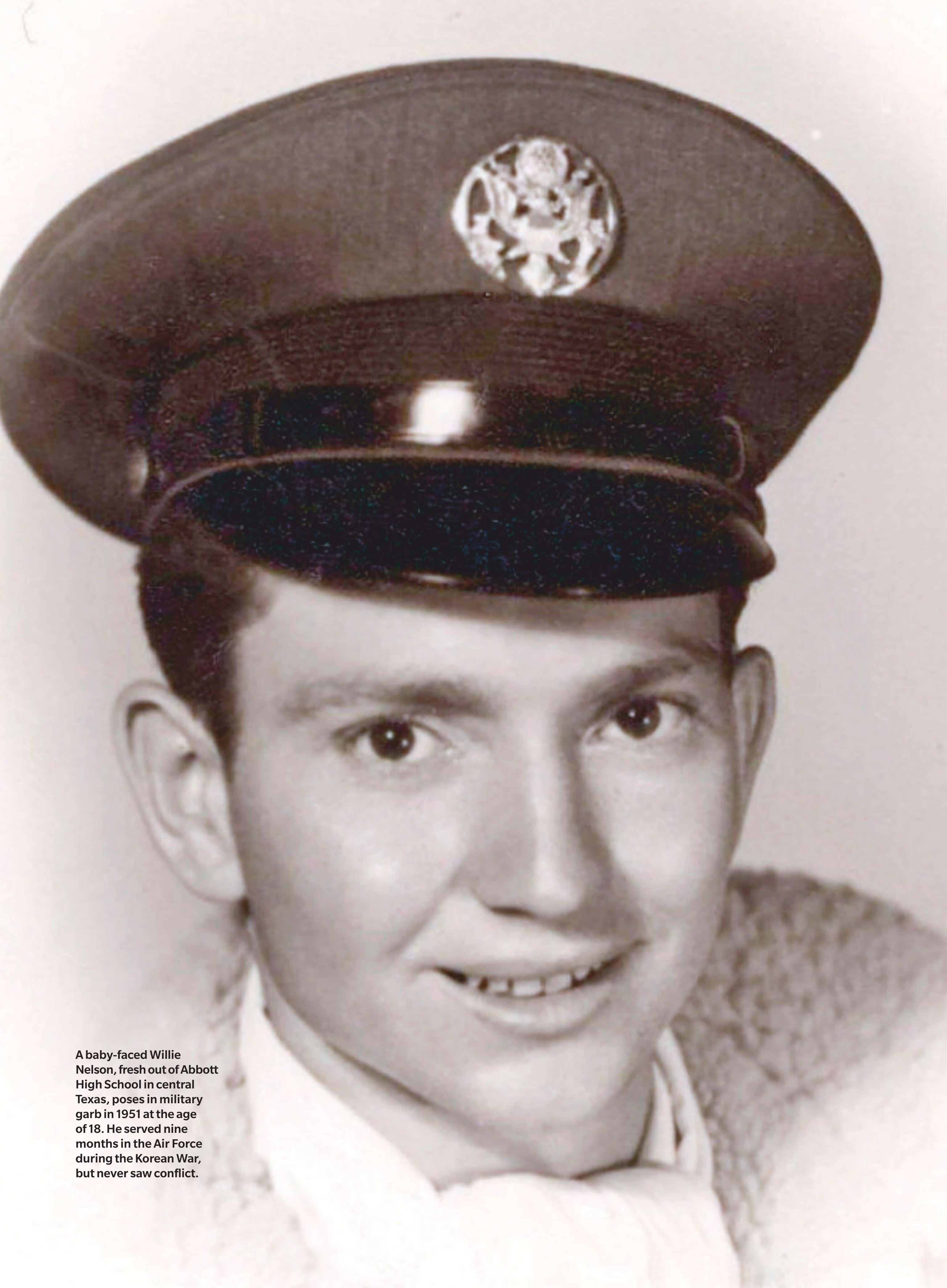
Bobbie was, in Nelson's words, his "closest friend for a whole lifetime." The two were inseparable for most of their lives, even when their parents abandoned them during their childhoods. For nearly a half century, beginning in 1973, "Little Sister Bobbie," as Nelson liked to call her, despite being two years her junior—was a mainstay of her brother's concerts and albums, holding down piano duties and singing harmonies just like they learned to do at their hometown church in Abbott, Texas.

Having played a vital role on so many iconic recordings—including, memorably, *The Red Headed Stranger*—Bobbie released her only solo album, *Autobiography*, in 2008. Nelson sang on two tracks from the mostly instrumental collection.

The siblings made one last, poignant visit to First Methodist Church in Abbott to sing together for the new *Willie Nelson & Family* docuseries, for which Bobbie was interviewed. "There's no telling Willie's story without Bobbie," observed co-director Oren Moverman. "[Their relationship] is beyond inspiring."

Barely a week after she passed away in hospice care, Nelson was back on stage, performing at his own Luck Reunion festival on March 18. Bobbie's signature cowboy hat was hung on her mic where her piano would usually have stood in a quiet tribute.

"If I was the sky, Sister Bobbie was the Earth. She grounded me," Nelson wrote in his memoir *Me and Sister Bobbie: True Tales of the Family Band*. "There is no longer or stronger or steadier relationship in my life."



A baby-faced Willie Nelson, fresh out of Abbott High School in central Texas, poses in military garb in 1951 at the age of 18. He served nine months in the Air Force during the Korean War, but never saw conflict.

God's Problem Child

HE GREW UP DIRT-POOR DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION, PICKING COTTON AND SINGING HYMNS. BUT THE MUSIC HE FOUND OUTSIDE THE CHURCH WAS HIS SALVATION.

> *"Ninety-nine percent of what I write has come from my own experience. A person could start from my first song and go all the way to the last and write my autobiography."*
>
> WILLIE NELSON

Built in 1899, the First Methodist Church of Abbott, Texas, was where a young Willie Nelson spent his Sundays growing up. He bought it in 2006.

Willie Nelson's journey to the pinnacle of the country music world began not more than 140 miles from his sprawling, present-day estate near Austin, Texas, in the small, dusty Texas town of Abbott, just outside Waco. The life he lived in his youth, however, couldn't be further from the one he knows today. It was a hardscrabble one full of heartbreak and neglect with a broken home in a dirt-poor farming community. Neon lights and floodlights weren't just a daydream for the redheaded boy with the almond eyes. They were fantasy.

Nelson was born in the deepest throes of the Great Depression, on April 29, 1933, the second of two children of Ira and Myrle Nelson. His parents were 16 and 15 years old, respectively, when they were married and had Nelson's older sister, Bobbie—two years his senior—just one year after getting hitched. Ira was a freeloading musician, Myrle a free spirit, and together they made a lousy match. The couple were divorced when Willie was only 6 months old. His mother left for the Pacific Northwest, his father remarried and

Nelson picked cotton alongside Blacks, Mexicans and fellow "poor white trash" as a kid. "It was sort of expected that I went and made the money, because we needed it," he later remembered.

Willie and Bobbie were left to be raised by their paternal grandparents, Alfred and Nancy Nelson.

Alfred, a blacksmith by trade, and Nancy had come to Texas from Arkansas, and were poor even by Abbott's low standards. Theirs was a musical home: Alfred was music director at the Abbott Methodist Church, while Nancy, who took mail-order music lessons, was a music teacher. Alfred gave Willie a Stella guitar from the Sears, Roebuck catalog when he was 6 years old, by which time Bobbie was already taking piano lessons from Nancy. Willie learned the chords to old spirituals from his grandfather and picked up whatever else he could by watching his sister practice. But there was more hardship in store that same year when his granddad died from a reaction to medication he was given for a bout of pneumonia. "I hadn't even had time to grieve for the loss of a mother and daddy, much less my grandfather," Nelson wrote in his 1988 book, *Willie: An Autobiography*. "Our separation from Mother and Daddy seemed worse than a death because they were still out there in the world."

STILL THE KINGS

The artists who shaped a young Willie Nelson.

Bob Wills

Known as "The King of Western Swing," Bob Wills put Texas' brand of country music on the map with his Texas Playboys, formed in 1934, and a string of hits including "San Antonio Rose" and "Ida Red." He was an influential bandleader who thrived in the swing era, starring in film and on the radio. Waylon Jennings immortalized Wills in his 1975 track "Bob Wills Is Still the King."

Django Reinhardt

Willie Nelson's not-so-secret weapon is his flamenco-kissed guitar playing, and no one influenced him in this regard like Django Reinhardt. The Belgian-born gypsy jazz player's intricate, arpeggiated finger picking comes through in Nelson's unique pinched phrasing and clean, forceful rhythm work. His 2015 LP with Merle Haggard, *Django & Jimmie*, was named in Reinhardt's honor.

Hank Williams

One of country music's most tragic heroes, Hank Williams set the template Nelson followed for raw, bruising balladry. Hits like "Move It on Over," "Your Cheatin' Heart" and "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" remain pillars of the genre, but he was tortured in his personal life. Wracked with back pain and gripped by alcoholism, he died of heart failure on New Year's Day in 1953, at age 29.

Frank Sinatra

As a youngster listening to whatever signal his radio received, Nelson heard far more than the country sounds of the Grand Ole Opry or *Louisiana Hayride*. There was big band, swing and jazz music, and a young singer named Frank Sinatra, who was one of the first artists to embrace the intimacy afforded by studio microphones. Decades later, Nelson recorded two albums of Sinatra covers.

Before he died, Alfred brought home a Philco radio, which Willie—nicknamed "Booger Red" for picking his nose until it bled—glued himself to, listening to broadcasts of the Grand Ole Opry from Nashville, Tennessee. "He'd pick up things just like that," Bobbie later remembered. "His ear is so fantastic, he doesn't even know how good he is." He was obsessed with the music of Jimmie Rodgers and Roy Acuff and dreamed of being a shoot-'em-up cowboy like his big-screen idol, Gene Autry. At age 7, he wrote his first song, and at 9 he and Bobbie were performing to live audiences at church revivals. Before long, he joined his first band, a polka act fronted by neighbor John Rejcek. During the summers, Willie picked cotton for $1.50 a day, but for his first gig with Rejcek he brought home a week's wages. After that, there was no doubt where his future lay. "I didn't like picking cotton one bit," he told *People* magazine in 1980. "I used to stand in the fields and watch the cars go by and think, 'I want to go with them.'"

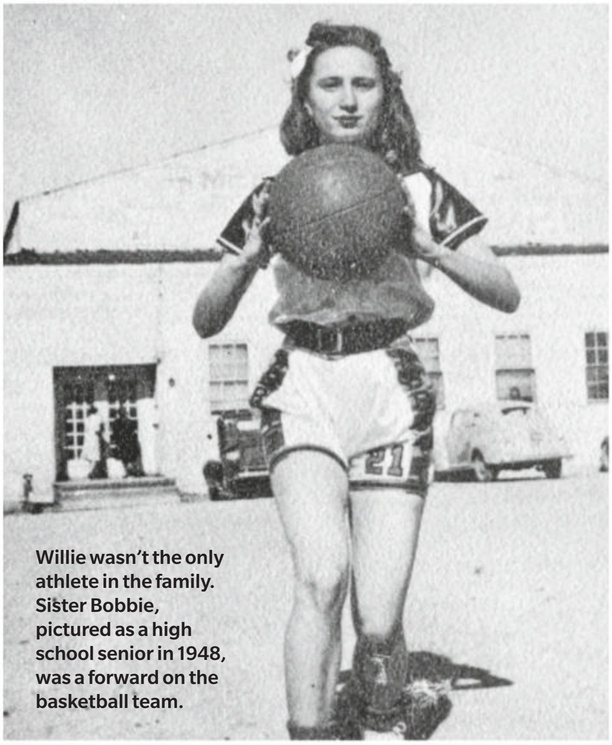
Playing music was the ticket for Nelson to get out and see the world, and when Bobbie married a small-time hustler named Bud Fletcher, he was recruited to sing and play lead guitar for Fletcher's band, the Texans, a group that was modeled after Willie's hero Bob Wills and his band the Texas Playboys. "The girls loved him," Bobbie said. "They were like a fan club of his that just was always there." Much to grandmother Nancy's chagrin, the siblings spent their teenage years traveling the beer joints and dance halls of Texas.

Despite his late-night rambles, Nelson was a good student who was popular with his peers and a three-sport athlete, including football, basketball and baseball. He was also a member of the Future Farmers of America. Once he graduated high school, however, he became aimless. First came a stint in the Air Force, from which he was honorably discharged for having a bad back and, more than likely, a few too many late nights. Then came a spell studying agriculture at Baylor University in Waco, but that didn't stick either. ("I majored in dominoes," he told *Rolling Stone*.) So it was back to the honky tonks, where he met a 16-year-old carhop named Martha Matthews and fell in love for the first time. They married in 1952. "She was a full-blooded Cherokee, and every night with us was like Custer's last stand," he said. "We'd live in one place a month, then pack up and move when the rent would come due."

Throughout the '50s, Nelson, Martha and their three children did a lot of moving, and he worked the oddest of odd jobs. He was a bouncer, a saddle maker and a tree trimmer (twice), sold vacuums and hocked Bibles and encyclopedias, taught Sunday school and worked in a pawn shop. He spent time in San Antonio, San Diego, Seattle and St. Louis, and lied his way into spinning records for various radio stations, through which he got the chance to record his own music for the first time. In 1958, the family landed in Houston, where Nelson worked the local club circuit and tried to sell his songs. Hard up for cash, as usual, he sold "Family Bible"—a song he wrote while working as a DJ in Vancouver, Washington, which was inspired by his grandmother's after-dinner hymns—to music instructor Paul Buskirk for a measly $50. At Buskirk's encouragement, singer Claude Gray cut the song as a single and, after its release in February 1960, it climbed to No. 7 on the *Billboard* country chart. Nelson had his first hit.

His own career may not have been going anywhere, but his songs were, and that was enough. So, at the age of 27, Nelson decided to shoot for the big time, loaded up his run-down Buick and headed for Nashville.

> **"The older guys loved Willie. People always just migrated toward him, the same way they do now."**
>
> BOBBIE NELSON, WILLIE'S SISTER



Willie wasn't the only athlete in the family. Sister Bobbie, pictured as a high school senior in 1948, was a forward on the basketball team.

It's not hip to be square: Willie Nelson, as he appeared throughout much of his shiftless '60s phase, sporting a turtleneck and sport coat. Stardom, not to mention his long hair and beard, was still a ways off.

The Promiseland

A STRING OF RECORDS FOR OTHER ARTISTS, INCLUDING PATSY CLINE'S "CRAZY," MADE WILLIE NELSON HOT PROPERTY AS A NASHVILLE SONGWRITER, BUT NOT AS A SINGER.

For any aspiring country singer or songwriter in the '50s and '60s, Nashville, Tennessee, was the place to be. Producers Chet Atkins and Owen Bradley were the architects behind the "Nashville Sound" that churned out hit after hit on the assembly lines of RCA and Decca Records, respectively. Publishing houses like Acuff-Rose provided them with the raw material from their rosters of songwriters, who received a penny per play in song royalties. Music Row was where the magic happened, and the Grand Ole Opry was where it got heard.

When Willie Nelson reached Music City in the spring of 1960, he had the success of "Family Bible" to his name, if none of the royalties. As he later recalled in *Willie: An Autobiography*, he knew more about getting a foot in the door than getting paid for his work. "The way I looked at it, songs for a songwriter were like paintings for a painter," he wrote. "You finish one and you sell it for whatever you can get and then you do another." He soon gravitated toward Tootsie's Orchid Lounge, a downtown dive around the corner from the Ryman Auditorium, home of the Opry, where the stars passed through and aspiring ones might hope to get noticed.

It was at Tootsie's that Nelson met Hank Cochran, who co-wrote Patsy Cline's 1961 crossover hit "I Fall to Pieces" with songwriting kingpin Harlan Howard. Cochran was impressed by the original compositions he heard Nelson play during a backroom song swap and invited the newcomer to visit him at the office of Pamper Music, the songwriting house where Cochran worked. The next day, Nelson was hired, for a salary of $50 a week plus royalties.

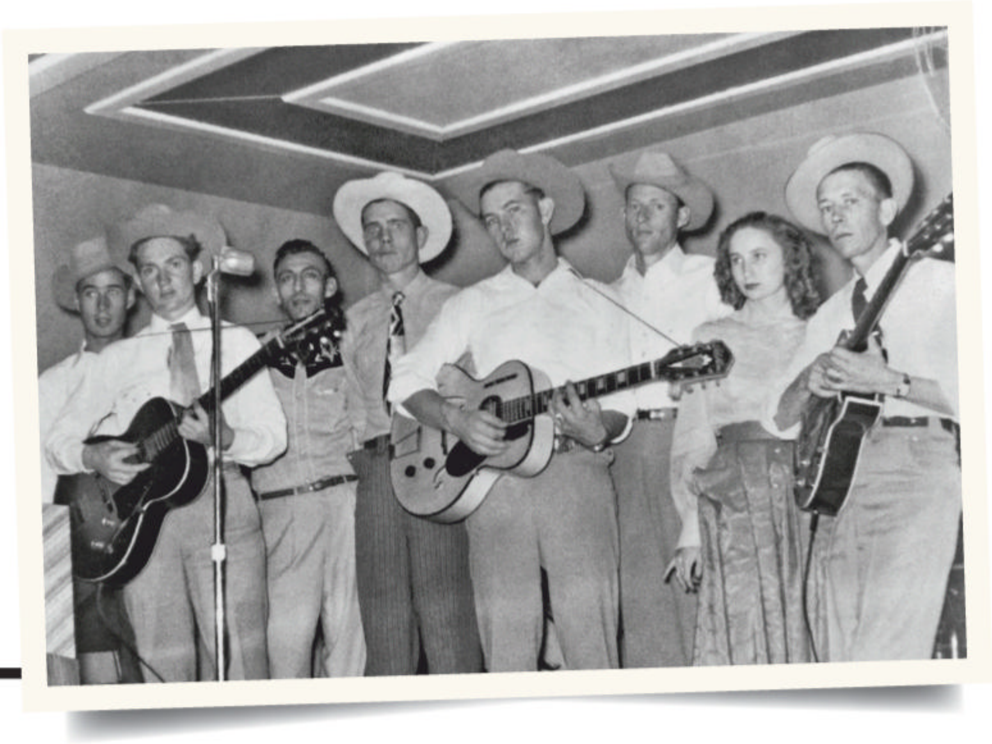
> "I'd heard his songs. We knew what Willie was like. He had the desire, and he was willing to work for it."
>
> RAY PRICE, FRIEND AND FORMER BANDLEADER

Chet Atkins

Owen Bradley

His quirky, inventive storytelling didn't fit the smoothed-out structures of the "countrypolitan" format, but no matter. It had broader appeal. "Hello Walls," an oddball song about a heartbroken narrator who seeks comfort by talking to the walls of his bedroom ("Well look here / Is that a teardrop / In the corner of your pane?" he asks the window), caught the attention of Faron Young, who released it as a single in March 1961. "[Young] made a little bit of fun out of the song," Nelson remembered in 2020. "He would go around singing, 'Hello walls, hello commode.'" The song was a smash, reaching No. 1 on the country chart and No. 12 on *Billboard*'s Hot 100 for pop songs, which meant a far greater reach in terms of listeners—and much better money.

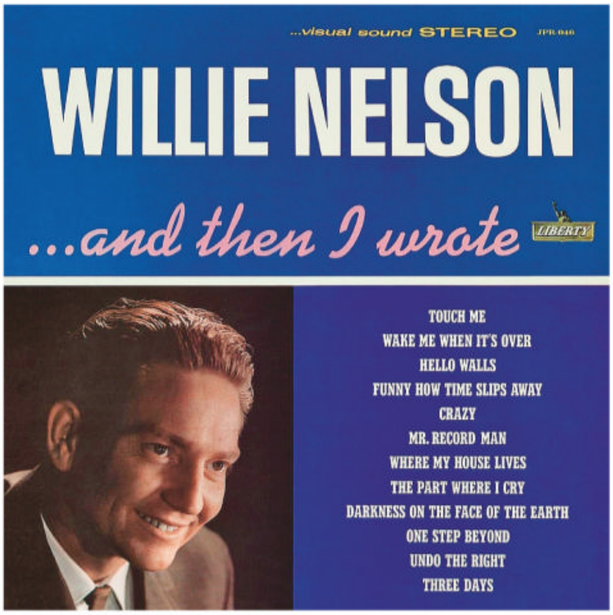
Nelson was in business, and before long business was booming. Billy Walker recorded "Mr. Record Man," a song Nelson first tried to sell for $10 while


Before landing in Nashville, Nelson (second from the left) is pictured in 1955 with an unspecified band in Texas. Once in Music City, he was dressed to the nines as the bassist for Ray Price's backing band.

Hank Cochran

WORLD FAMOUS
Tootsies
ORCHID LOUNGE
BUD LIGHT

Hattie Louise "Tootsie" Bess opened Tootsie's Orchid Lounge in 1960. "Tootsie had a heart for everyday folks like me who had come to Nashville with a pocketful of dreams," wrote Nelson. (Bottom) Willie's debut LP, *...And Then I Wrote*, did not ignite his career.



he lived in Houston, and "Funny How Time Slips Away," a minor hit at the time that became a jukebox favorite. Biggest of all was "Crazy," a song that Cochran made sure to get in front of Owen Bradley, Cline's producer. On Cline's monumental recording of the song, Bradley took Nelson's bare-bones demo and dressed it up with layers of slick backing vocals that complemented Cline's gusto lead. The track went to No. 2 on both the country and easy listening charts and cracked the Top 10 pop songs early in 1962 (see sidebar, opposite).

"Crazy" became Nelson's calling card. Even with Bradley's production, the lyrics' spare style and direct emotion hit square in the gut. Already a master of sad songs, the power of his writing came in its economy. "A lot of country music is sad," he later reflected. "I think most art comes out of hard times. It applies to all music. 'Three chords and the truth' [a motto made famous by Harlan Howard]—that's what a country song is. There's a lot of heartache in the world."

Nelson was in demand as a songwriter, but he yearned to be a star in his own right. Ray Price, a co-owner of Pamper and one of Nashville's top-selling crooners, gave him a chance to get back on the road when he hired him to play bass for his backing band, the Cherokee Cowboys, in 1961. Price was an old friend of singer Lefty Frizzell's and a former roommate of Hank Williams' who insisted on his players donning rhinestone Nudie Suits (made by tailor Nudie Cohn). Nelson also landed his first recording contract with West Coast label Liberty Records. His debut LP, *...And Then I Wrote*, released in September 1962, featured his own versions of each of his major compositions, but it failed to make an impression. If his writing excelled for its idiosyncrasies, then his equally sophisticated singing, with a carefully enunciated phrasing that wove in and out of the melody line, simply didn't catch on with the public.

While his recording career floundered, Nelson's personal life grew complicated. A trip to record in Los Angeles introduced him to singer and yodeler Shirley Collie, with whom he recorded the duet "Willingly," which climbed to No. 7—his first Top 10 country hit. He also fell in love, despite still being married to Martha. After he got divorced (see page 46), he and Collie were wed in Las Vegas in 1963, and at the end of the year moved into a ranch on 17 acres of land in Ridgetop, Tennessee, about 20 miles outside Nashville. Collie toured with her new husband's band and appeared on his second record, *Here's Willie Nelson*, but it, too, went nowhere.

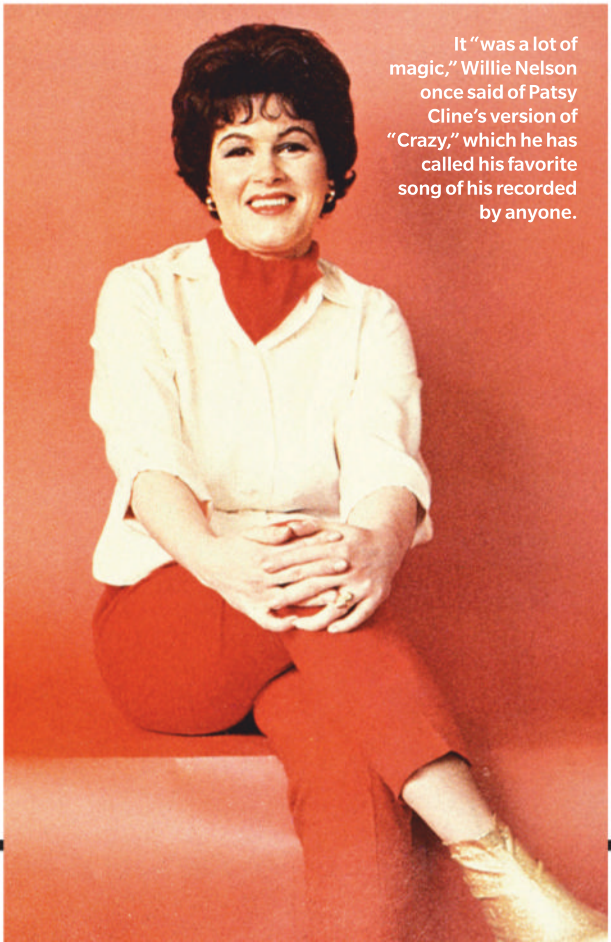
Not long after, Liberty folded and Nelson signed a new contract with Monument Records. The deal lasted all of one single, "I Never Cared for You," before he left in a huff because of a disagreement over a full-page print ad that was promised by the label. Typically, Nelson still produced a hit for someone else when Roy Orbison cut the Christmas-friendly "Pretty Paper" for Monument. It was beginning to look like a trend, as then-struggling songwriter Kris Kristofferson, who moved to Nashville in 1965, told author Robert K. Oermann. "[We] were absolutely disciples of Willie Nelson," he said. "Every one of Willie's songs would be sung and analyzed for his emotion and his delivery and all this. It was a training ground for a whole bunch of us. We said, 'Willie will never make it because he's way too deep. He'll never make it because they don't understand him.'"

Nelson seemed to be one of only a few people who didn't buy into that line of thinking. Another—fortunately, or so it seemed at the time—was Chet Atkins.

A bearded Nelson with Monument president Fred Foster (center) and Fred Carter in 1960. "If your artist can write, you don't have to go out and break your back searching for a hit," Foster insisted.

NEARLY NO. 1

How the songwriter almost topped the pop charts, thanks to Patsy Cline.



It "was a lot of magic," Willie Nelson once said of Patsy Cline's version of "Crazy," which he has called his favorite song of his recorded by anyone.

Patsy Cline was the "Queen of Countrypolitan" when Willie Nelson arrived in Nashville. A native of Virginia, she achieved stardom before even reaching the country music capital, thanks to the breakout success of "Walkin' After Midnight." Once teamed with Owen Bradley in 1960, Cline personified the crossover appeal that the Nashville Sound aimed to achieve.

She was hardly won over by Nelson, however, whose writing she felt didn't match her bold, brassy delivery, and was initially nonplussed by the suggestion she record one of his songs. Husband Charlie Dick pitched her "Crazy" after meeting Nelson at Tootsie's (some accounts claim he sang it to her in her living room after Dick pulled her out of bed), but she only agreed after hearing Bradley's arrangement. In the end, her iconic vocal was done in one take. "I'd sang the song a million times, but never like that," Nelson marveled. "That's a pop song. There's nothing country about it—unless Patsy Cline sings it."

Cline's "Crazy" reached No. 9 on the Hot 100—Nelson's only Top 40 hit for over a decade and his highest ever until "Always on My Mind" went to No. 5 in 1982. The song returned to the charts with Linda Ronstadt, and LeAnn Rimes also covered it. Sadly, it was all but a parting gift from Cline, who died in a plane crash in 1963.

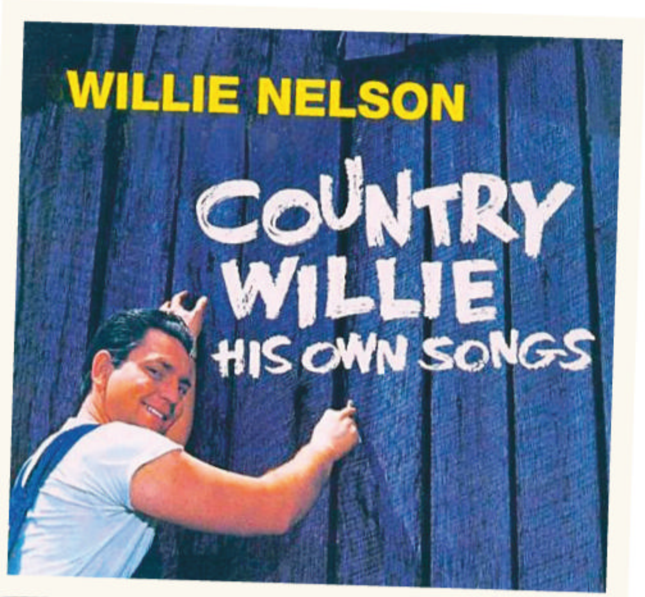
Early Phases, Small Stages

A DREAM GIG WITH RCA RECORDS WAS SUPPOSED TO BE THE SINGER'S BIG BREAK. INSTEAD, HE GOT LOST IN THE COGS OF THE NASHVILLE MACHINE.

> *"Chet [Atkins] was convinced I could be a superstar. It was hard to walk away. I had stars in my eyes. Always had, and probably always will."*
>
> WILLIE NELSON

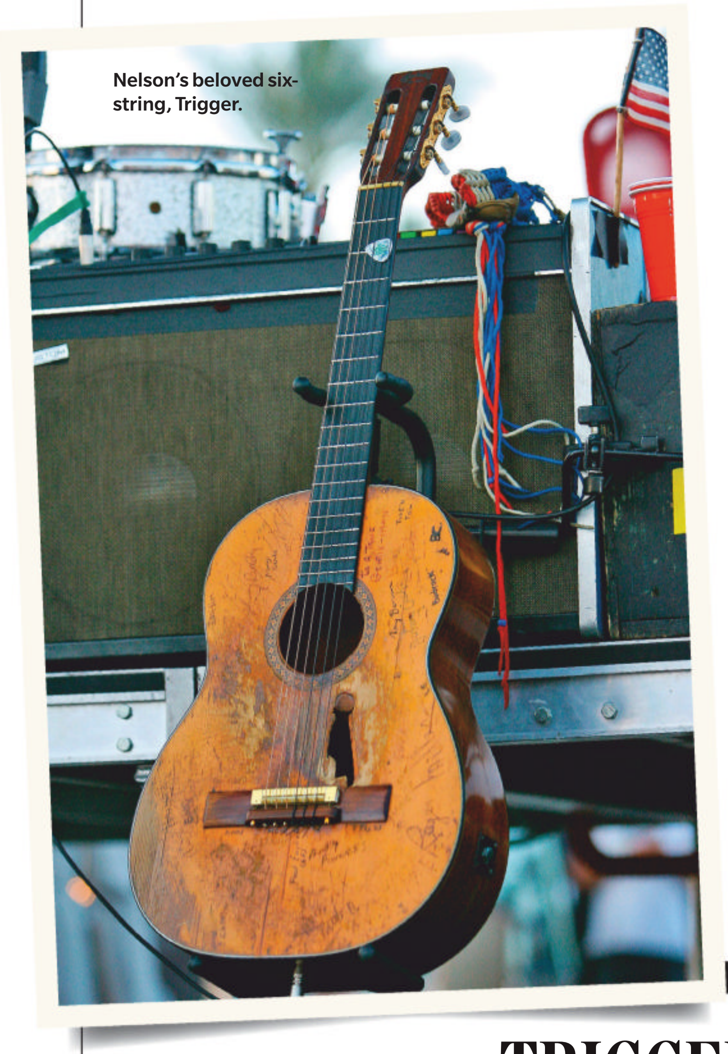
A talent like Willie Nelson wasn't going to be out of work for long. No sooner did he walk out on Monument Records than he showed up on the payroll at RCA Nashville in the fall of 1964. He'd flirted with the move before signing his previous deal, but was now teamed up with the biggest kingmaker of them all, Chet Atkins. If Nelson was going to make the big time, this was surely the place for it to happen.

Revered in Nashville, Tennessee, for the way he'd transformed the country music business, Atkins was a respected picker in his own right (his nickname was "Mr. Guitar") and had a keen eye for talent. But there was no room for compromise: He had total say over song selection, arrangements and personnel, insisting on using a core group of session players on almost every recording he made. Strings and horns were often part of the equation. "Chet Atkins was a great producer. He knew how to call together all the



The country bumpkin imagery of Nelson's RCA debut wasn't a lie—he raised livestock on his Ridgetop farm. "I am not a pig farmer," he later said. "The pigs had a great time, but I didn't make any money."

Willie Nelson in a Grand Ole Opry publicity photo from 1965. Despite the show's name recognition, Nelson left after less than a year. "I quit the Opry because I couldn't afford it," he said.



Nelson's beloved six-string, Trigger.

great musicians," Nelson told the *New Yorker* in 2020. "But the problem was me trying to do my songs live with the bands that I was recording with. I had 20 pieces in the studio, but when I go out to play I've only got four or five. So it had to change—I had to play the music that I could play with my band."

Playing live was by now a major part of how Nelson earned a living, despite his $10,000-a-year salary. In the summer of 1964, he gained membership to the Grand Ole Opry. It was a prestigious gig—the program aired each week over national radio on NBC—but not a lucrative one, with the caveat that artists had to perform on the show at least 26 weeks out of the year. That was a problem for Nelson, whose steadiest and best-paying gigs were back in Texas. He even recorded a live album, *Country Music Concert*, at Panther Hall in Fort Worth, Texas. Keeping on the Opry's schedule typically meant rushing back overnight from a Friday night appearance to make the Saturday broadcast.

All of this might have been OK except that Nelson's records still weren't selling. His first album for RCA, *Country Willie: His Own Songs*, leaned into a hayseed image, picturing him in bib overalls on the cover and rehashing new recordings of his best-known compositions. The next two, *Country Favorites: Willie Nelson Style* and *Make Way for Willie Nelson*, relied heavily on cover songs, but at least cracked the Top 10 of the country charts. His singles hovered around the fringe of the country Top 40. Privately,

TRIGGER HAPPY

The star's guitar is his most recognizable companion.

No guitar in the world is as famous as Willie Nelson's. It's so well known, in fact, that everyone calls it by its name: Trigger. The trusty Martin acoustic has been in service for over a half century, and it shows every one of those years on its battered exterior. It's scratched, scuffed and scrawled on with signatures, complete with a hole punched through its face. "Trigger's like me," Nelson told *Texas Monthly* in 2012. "Old and beat-up."

Trigger came into Nelson's life in 1969, when he was still treading water with RCA. He'd played several varieties of electric guitars up to that point, and switched to a Baldwin acoustic-electric before it was destroyed by a drunken fan during a gig at John T. Floore Country Store in Helotes, Texas. When he consulted with luthier and friend Shot Jackson, he was advised to try a Martin D-20 that Jackson had at his shop. Nelson agreed, but wanted the electric pickup from the Baldwin to be installed. Thus Trigger, from the outset something of a Frankenstein's monster, was born.

Nelson was delighted to discover that the new guitar at last allowed him to capture the tone he dreamed of re-creating, that of his hero Django Reinhardt. Trigger formed a key part of the signature sound that first took shape on 1973's *Shotgun Willie*, and is the only instrument Nelson's recorded or performed with since, putting in more than 10,000 live shows. Along the way, he's saved the beloved guitar from the fire that destroyed his Ridgetop ranch and the clutches of the federal government, which nearly confiscated it during a 1990 IRS raid.

These days, Trigger requires regular upkeep to stay in use. Austin luthier Mark Erlewine does semiannual repairs to fix broken bridges and tuning knobs or to keep the wood from crumbling. Remarkably, the instrument is still going strong.

As for the name? "Roy Rogers had a horse named Trigger," Nelson said. "I figure, this is my horse!"

Nelson felt that the label wasn't doing its part to promote his music. Atkins later admitted as much. "I was just about the worst at promotion and sales. I didn't care anything about that part of the business," he said. "It hurt Willie a lot to have a guy with my attitude about sales as the one who was supposed to push his product."

In the midst of these mounting frustrations, Nelson stopped by a gig of Waylon Jennings' in Phoenix while out on tour. Jennings was a rock 'n' roller from Texas, an ex-member of Buddy Holly's band, who was busy tearing up the regional circuit but itching for a change. "[W]e shared a bottle of tequila and he asked my advice on his career. 'Whatever you do, Waylon, stay away from Nashville,' I told him. 'Nashville ain't ready for you. They'll just break your heart,'" Nelson recalled in *Willie: An Autobiography*.

Jennings didn't listen, and come 1965 was stablemates with Nelson at RCA. Four years Nelson's junior, the brash

> **"You can have a roomful of people put their heads together and still come up with the wrong answer."**
>
> **CHET ATKINS, ON WORKING WITH WILLIE NELSON**

Waylon Jennings performs at North Hollywood's famed Palomino Club on Feb. 1, 1972, clutching his signature embroidered Fender Telecaster guitar.

Johnny Cash was already known as the "Man in Black" when he recorded *At Folsom Prison* at the California penitentiary on Jan. 13, 1968 (above). Cash later wrote of his good friend Nelson, "He's a hard man to know. He keeps his inner thoughts for himself and his songs."

Bob Dylan

baritone singer had a combustible personality that was made even more hair-trigger by an amphetamine addiction. He clashed predictably with Atkins' system, particularly the fact that he wasn't allowed to produce his own albums or record with his crack backing band, the Waylors, which he brought with him from out West. Atkins also scolded him for his drug use. "Chet knew I wanted to make my own records," Jennings wrote in his 1996 book, *Waylon: An Autobiography*. "He opposed that mainly because RCA had several producers, and if he started letting artists like myself and Bobby Bare produce themselves, he'd lose some people he was very fond of."

Nelson assembled his own group of live players that he dubbed the Record Men. On 1967's *The Party's Over and Other Great Willie Nelson Songs*, he managed to get two of them into the sessions, steel pedal guitarist Jimmy Day and drummer Johnny Bush. A year later, at Atkins' behest, Nelson released a pseudo-concept record about his home state, *Texas in My Soul*. It flopped. His songwriting grew darker and more complicated, yet the new songs were stuffed incongruously onto his albums alongside older, lighter material. As if to emphasize the disconnect, 1968's *Good Times* featured the singer on a golf course smiling goofily and squeezing a young woman as she lined up a putt. Little wonder he believed RCA kept him on to farm out his best songs to other artists.

While Nelson flatlined his way through the end of the decade, falling completely off the charts with 1970's *Both Sides Now* and *Laying My Burdens Down*, Nashville was in the midst of upheaval. Student demonstrations in support of the civil rights movement and against the Vietnam

War gripped the campus of Vanderbilt University. A new group of hippie songwriters including Kris Kristofferson congregated nearby in the West End neighborhood. Rock musicians like Bob Dylan came to town and flouted studio protocol, recording at all hours of the day and night. Even Johnny Cash scored counterculture cool with *At Folsom Prison*—an enormous hit thanks to its aggressive cross-marketing to rock audiences—and starred in a popular network TV variety series, *The Johnny Cash Show*.

By contrast, the Nashville establishment remained staunchly conservative, and Nelson, like Jennings, was boxed in as a strictly country act. But he appeared out of touch all on his own, dressed in a suit and tie or turtleneck sweater, his face clean shaven and short hair slicked back. Already nearing 40, he was a tough sell to younger listeners. Everyone involved seemed perplexed on how to turn things around. "My band would fill a Texas dance hall. We were stars in Texas," Nelson lamented. "But in Nashville, I was looked at as a loser singer.... It was depressing."

In the early hours of Christmas Eve in 1970, fate intervened. While at a Christmas party in downtown Nashville, Nelson received a phone call from his nephew that his house in Ridgetop was on fire. "When I got there it was in flames and there were firemen everywhere," he told *Rolling Stone* in 1976. "So I run and get my stash bag [of weed] and run out. I had a pound of good Colombian in there and I knew I was gonna need it to get high." He also retrieved his new favorite guitar, Trigger (see sidebar, page 24), but lost to the inferno were dozens of demos and unreleased songs.

His second marriage to wife Shirley Collie had already fallen apart, with the alienated Collie having taken to drinking, pills and sleeping with other men. Nelson was living with a new girlfriend, Connie Koepke, whom he'd met in Houston. While the ranch was rebuilt, he decided to take Koepke and the family to Texas, where they settled in the small town of Bandera, a blip on the map outside San Antonio on the edge of Texas Hill Country. It was the move that changed Nelson's life.

> "When things get too hot, Dad disappears. He doesn't like confrontations."
>
> SUSIE NELSON, WILLIE'S DAUGHTER

ME & PAUL

For six decades, drummer and all-around tough guy Paul English was Willie's flamboyant pal.

Drummer Paul English was not only a longstanding member of Willie Nelson's band, but also his gun-toting bodyguard, accountant and close confidant who frequently kept the singer out of trouble.

English played the part to the hilt, dressing in black and wearing a cape. He lived the part as well: A member of the Texas mafia, he claimed to have been arrested more than 900 times, had a glass eye and worked as a pimp. English first played with Nelson while the latter was a DJ in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1955, then joined his band full time 11 years later. He was an invaluable asset, particularly when it came to dealing with bar owners. "The club business was rough, so you went in with a you-motherf---er-you-better-pay-me attitude from the start," Nelson told biographer Joe Nick Patoski.

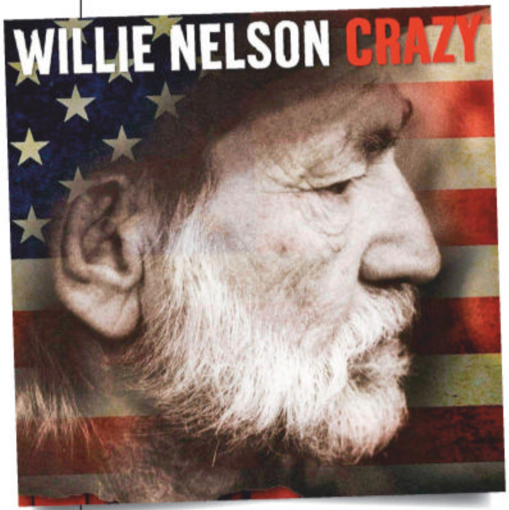
No one was above English's wrath; he once tackled and pulled a gun on famed promoter Bill Graham and shot bandmate Jimmy Day over an argument. Nelson commemorated their friendship in 1971's "Me and Paul," but a year later came devastating tragedy when English's wife, Jane, committed suicide. His younger brother Billy eventually joined the Family as a second drummer.

English was slowed by a stroke in 2014, but continued to play with Nelson until his death, from a bout of pneumonia, at age 87 in 2020. "He was my best friend," said Nelson, who put their adventures to paper in his newest book, *Me and Paul: Untold Stories of a Fabled Friendship*, released September 20, 2022 by Harper Horizon.

Essential Willie

A MASTER INTERPRETER AS WELL AS ONE OF COUNTRY MUSIC'S GREATEST SONGWRITERS, THE LEGEND IS AT HIS VERY BEST ON THESE 10 TRACKS.

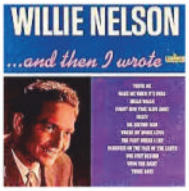
> *"That cat can sing. He can sing my songs but I don't know if I can sing his."*
>
> FRANK SINATRA



"Crazy"

***...And Then I Wrote*, 1962**

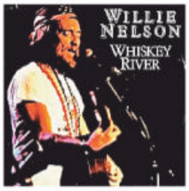
Hailed as one of the 20th century's greatest pieces of popular music, "Crazy" will forever be remembered for Patsy Cline's outsized performance. And rightfully so. Yet Willie Nelson's 1962 rendition cuts closer to the song's core. Its loping, doo-wop arrangement and plinking piano echo Cline's version, but whereas she attacks hers with sure-footed sophistication, Nelson's clipped phrasing and half-spoken cadence are ever so uncertain. If his unvarnished voice sounds frozen in time, the key idiosyncrasies of his delivery are already there. Even at this early juncture, one thing is apparent: No one sings Willie quite like Willie.



"Funny How Time Slips Away"

***...And Then I Wrote*, 1962**

"Funny How Time Slips Away" had already charted with Billy Walker and become a crossover pop hit with teen idol Jimmy Elledge before Nelson released it on *...And Then I Wrote*. A decade later, Elvis Presley and Al Green put their own spins on it, proving its versatility as a cross-genre standard. The conversational tone of the song is key, serving at once to help twist in the knife and shield the narrator's hurt. Cut from the same cloth as "Crazy," "Funny," like its predecessor, was never released as a single by Nelson, but the two are usually paired together in his live shows.



"Whiskey River"

***Shotgun Willie*, 1973**

On the face of it a song about drinking away the pain of a broken heart, "Whiskey River" is the sound of a man celebrating a fresh lease on life. Nelson finds amber-colored courage in his newfound freedom from the Nashville machine on this track penned by Johnny Bush, anchoring it with a lurching bass line and sister Bobbie's barrelhouse piano. The results are suitably loose and, at times, sloppy as it swaggers, then stumbles from verse to chorus. Nelson's traditional show opener virtually since it was recorded, "Whiskey River" gets a faster, friskier reading on 1978's *Willie and Family Live*.

WILLIE NELSON
Blue Eyes Crying In The Rain
Bandera

“Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain”

***Red Headed Stranger*, 1975**

Written by Fred Rose in 1945 for his publishing partner and country star Roy Acuff, “Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain” had never been a hit and was largely forgotten when Nelson cut it 30 years later. It wound up being arguably the most important song he ever recorded. Nelson’s decision to use a sparse accompaniment, leaving him and Trigger in dual-personality dialogue, is now the stuff of lore, but only because it paid off so handsomely. Two years later, this murder-ballad-cum-love-song was further immortalized in Waylon Jennings’ “Luckenbach, Texas (Back to the Basics of Love).”

WILLIE NELSON
BLUE SKIES
GEORGIA ON MY MIND

“Georgia on My Mind”

***Stardust*, 1978**

Few artists could dream of approaching Ray Charles on a tune like “Georgia on My Mind,” so it’s a testament to Nelson that he puts his own stamp on this Hoagy Carmichael standard. He does so, in typical fashion, with an understated performance that lingers sorrowfully on each line like the swells of Booker T. Jones’ organ. Rather than featuring a break by Trigger, the song gets cracked open by Mickey Raphael’s wistful and wounded harmonica solo. Lukas Nelson and his band Promise of the Real pay tribute to watching his father play “Georgia” night after night on 2017’s “Forget About Georgia.”

My Heroes Have Been Cowboys
WILLIE NELSON

“My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys”

***The Electric Horseman*, 1979**

A real-world comedown from the mythmaking of “Mammas Don’t Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys,” “My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys” was recorded for the soundtrack to *The Electric Horseman*, the film in which Nelson made his big-screen debut. Far from the romance of Lone Star belt buckles and clear mountain mornings, “Heroes,” written by Sharon Vaughn, finds the cold truth of broken dreams, a wasted youth and the empty pleasure of bedding hookers. Recorded three years prior by Jennings, the song’s better suited to Nelson, whose airy remorse gives it the authentic touch it needs.

WILLIE NELSON
ON THE ROAD AGAIN

“On the Road Again”

***Honeysuckle Rose*, 1980**

There may be no better sing-along in the country music canon than “On the Road Again,” and no song better encapsulates Nelson’s lifelong love affair with staying in a constant state of motion. Fittingly, he wrote it while on the road—or, rather, in the air—scribbling the lyrics on the back of a doggie bag during a cross-country flight. Cut as the main theme for *Honeysuckle Rose*, this band-of-gypsies paean to “making music with my friends” speeds by with hand-clapping fervor, but also stands out as a neat demonstration of Nelson’s jazz- and flamenco-flavored picking.

WILLIE NELSON & FAMILY
HONEYSUCKLE ROSE

“Angel Flying Too Close to the Ground”

***Honeysuckle Rose*, 1980**

As sad as any song in Nelson’s long line of tearjerkers, “Angel Flying Too Close to the Ground’s” anticipatory grief is palpable. Nelson is a master of extracting every sinew of emotion from a vocal and is at his best on this prelapsarian dirge, quavering over each syllable before doubling his vocals in the final verse, with devastating affect. Trigger is a perfect foil, shooting off ragged, dive-bombing notes to make it feel every bit like the heavens are tumbling down.

Willie Nelson
Always On My Mind

“Always on My Mind”

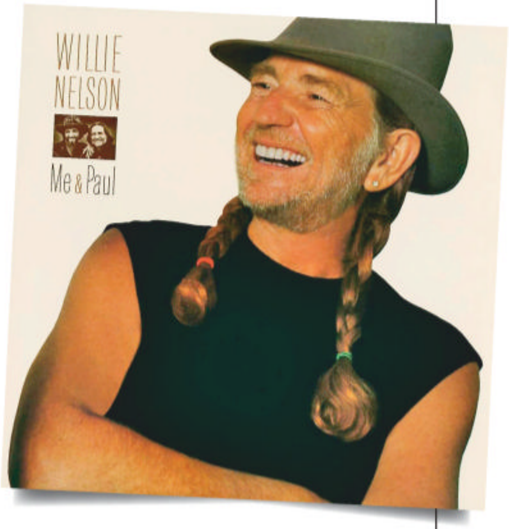
***Always on My Mind*, 1982**

A debt of gratitude belongs to Merle Haggard for “Always on My Mind,” as it was he who turned down a chance to record the song—written by Wayne Carson, Johnny Christopher and Mark James—when it was offered to him during the *Pancho & Lefty* sessions. Nelson had no such hesitations. “ ‘Always on My Mind’ bowled me over the moment I heard it, which is one of the ways I pick songs to record,” he later wrote. The early ’80s production sounds a bit dated today, but no matter; this is Nelson in his pomp, flying on instinct and never missing a beat.

“Forgiving You Was Easy”

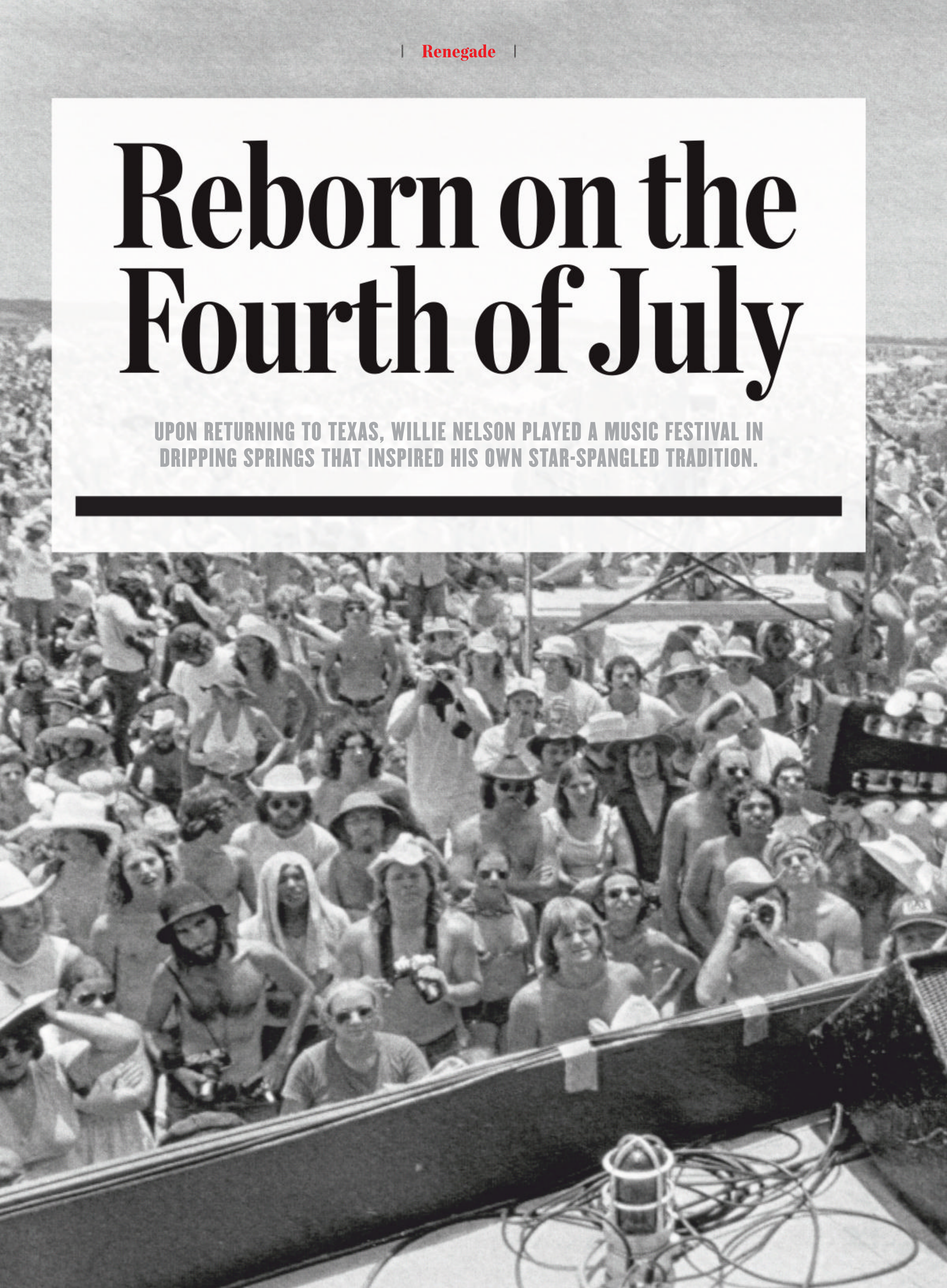
***Me & Paul*, 1985**

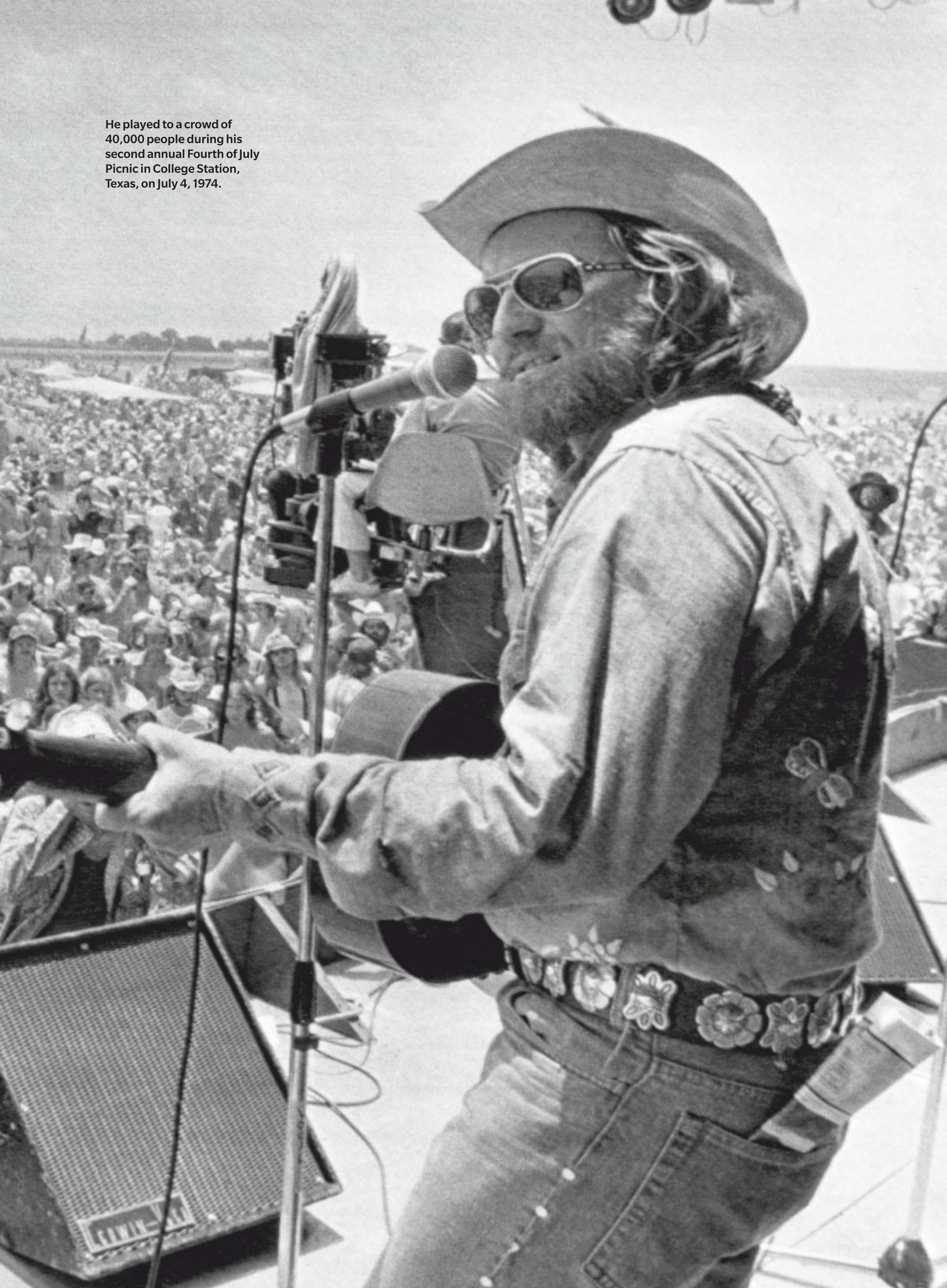
There’s a dreamlike quality to “Forgiving You Was Easy,” but don’t let that fool you: However convincing Nelson’s magnanimity is on this 1985 hit, his self-effacement is only an illusion. He was, by this time, an expert at shading in nuances, and with the help of billowy harmonics and a festive Tejano-tinged melody he’s as subtle as can be. It’s just that pesky “but” in the refrain that gives away the lie. Nelson has an endless knack for making heartache sound beautiful. Even by his standards, it’s rarely this alluring.



Reborn on the Fourth of July

UPON RETURNING TO TEXAS, WILLIE NELSON PLAYED A MUSIC FESTIVAL IN DRIPPING SPRINGS THAT INSPIRED HIS OWN STAR-SPANGLED TRADITION.





He played to a crowd of 40,000 people during his second annual Fourth of July Picnic in College Station, Texas, on July 4, 1974.

Annie Leibovitz

Like so many watershed moments in Willie Nelson's early career, the Dripping Springs Reunion was an unmitigated disaster. But it was as pivotal as any other time in his life—and by extension, the event that helped put Austin, Texas, on the national radar and make outlaw country a pop culture phenomenon.

Held on a remote 7,000-acre ranch outside Dripping Springs in the Texas Hill Country in March 1972, the three-day Reunion was conceived as a Woodstock for "straight folks," a place where hippies and rednecks could come together in peace and bond over their shared love of country music. The bill was stellar, with more than two dozen artists including Buck Owens, Charlie Rich, Loretta Lynn, Charley Pride and Roger Miller.

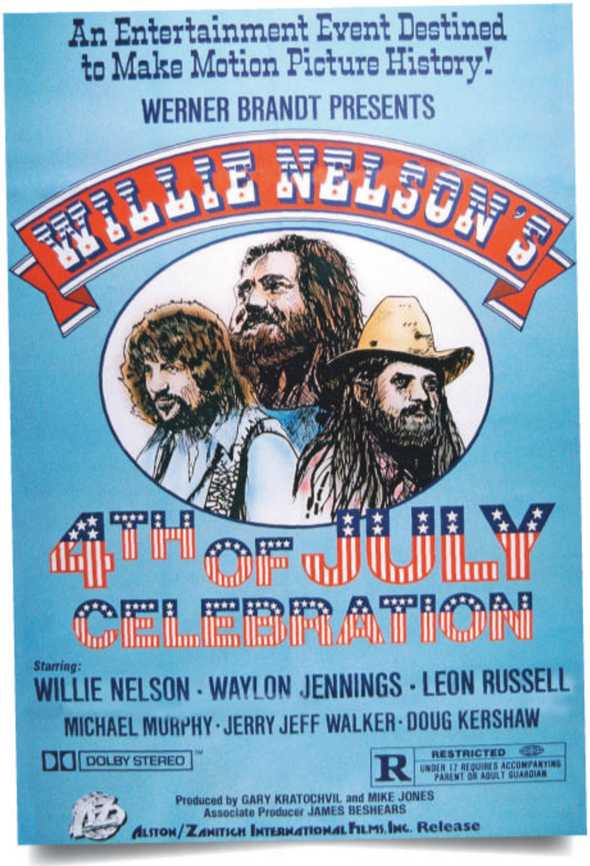
Buzz around the Reunion was such that photographers Jim Marshall and Annie Leibovitz were both on hand to shoot pictures, the latter for *Rolling Stone*, which also had reporter Grover Lewis on the ground. Organizers expected as many as 200,000 people to attend, but the Reunion was badly under-promoted and the fans simply didn't show up. Barely 12,000 of them passed through the gates, with the financial loss estimated to run well over $100,000.

Nelson, who had never played an outdoor festival, performed on the final night. In Lewis' report, Nelson was asked whether he'd return for a second Reunion. "You mean if the same people was runnin' it, or somebody else was?" came his reply. "That first Reunion didn't draw because the promoters didn't know how to promote it in Austin," he later elaborated to *Texas Monthly*. "They spent all the money in Dallas, the big cities. They didn't let the local people know where to go. But I saw it was a good idea."

Backstage, Waylon Jennings heard Billy Joe Shaver playing a song he'd written called "Willy the Wandering Gypsy and Me"—inspired, naturally, by Nelson. Jennings insisted on recording it, which led to his doing nearly an entire album's worth of Shaver's songs, to be released the following year as *Honky Tonk Heroes*. The collaborative spirit convinced Nelson that country music had a strong enough foothold in Austin that he should move there.

As things transpired, there was another festival held in Dripping Springs in 1973, but Nelson himself was the one running it. Typically, the idea came together at the very last minute, with planning starting only a month before the show date. This time, he chose the Fourth of July, and returned to the same ranch as the Reunion, given that he saw it as a ready-made venue.

That first Fourth of July Picnic attracted 40,000 fans, but was a chaotic affair that set the tone for years to come. Sanitation was dreadful, electricity cut out, fans suffered heat exhaustion and fights erupted between the drunk and the drugged-out. In what became a hallmark of Nelson's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Produced by GARY KRATOCHVIL and MIKE JONES
Associate Producer JAMES BESHEARS
ALSTON/ZANITSCH INTERNATIONAL FILMS, INC. Release

Waylon Jennings and Leon Russell share top billing with Nelson on this poster from *Willie Nelson's 4th of July Celebration*, a feature film documentary released in June 1979.

> "I got into that dang peyote and got to thinking I was Jesus. I just walked around healing people."

BILLY JOE SHAVER, REMEMBERING THE DRIPPING SPRINGS REUNION

haphazard productions of the era, most of the profits disappeared in the hands of sketchy business associates.

The following year, the Picnic started a long-running search for a suitable venue with a move to the Texas World Speedway near College Station, but the craziness followed, most notably with a parking lot fire that torched a dozen vehicles. Its next home was the small town of Liberty Hill, which saw 70,000 people flock in and use residents' front lawns as bathrooms. Nelson was sued by the city for bringing "moral pollution." One deputy sheriff told the *Austin American Statesmen*, "If we had arrested all the naked and drunk people I saw, we'd have filled our jail and yours and all of the jails from here to Dallas."

Things got worse in 1976, when the Picnic, now held in Gonzales, Texas, had its largest-ever turnout at somewhere north of 80,000. Local residents protested the event, Nelson was denied a permit, canceled the show, then held it anyway, only to face more legal trouble for breaking the Texas Mass Gathering Act that limited large events to 12 hours. Music ran nearly to the break of dawn, when a rainstorm knocked out the PA system before Nelson had even played his set. About 140 people were arrested, four were kidnapped and three reported being raped. Nelson vowed never to hold another Picnic.

He did, of course, including a short stint at his own golf club, a few held outside Texas and, after skipping several years in the '80s and '90s, for a while in Luckenbach. Finally, in 2015, the Picnic returned to Austin at the Circuit of the Americas racetrack. The rowdiness of those early Picnics was a distant memory, with security tight and bathrooms and water readily available. But the significance of that first Reunion can't be underestimated.

"Without it, Willie might have gone back to Nashville," Nelson biographer Joe Nick Patoski said in 2012. "And without Willie, there would be no high-tech industry [in Austin], no Creative Class, no 'Live Music Capital of the World' designation, no *Austin City Limits* and no South by Southwest. Honest."

THE OTHER OUTLAWS

He wasn't country music's only troublemaker in the '70s. These were his fellow protagonists.

Waylon Jennings

The moody counterpart to carefree Willie Nelson, Jennings grew up outside Lubbock in the flatlands of West Texas and cut his teeth on rock 'n' roll. He crossed paths with Buddy Holly while working as a radio DJ, and the two became close friends prior to Holly's death in a plane crash in 1959. Jennings famously turned down a seat on that flight in favor of the Big Bopper, who, along with Ritchie Valens, also perished on "The Day the Music Died." Wracked with guilt forever after, Jennings eventually scored 15 country No. 1 songs in his own right.

Kris Kristofferson

Yet another Texan, Kristofferson was born in the border town of Brownsville where, like Nelson and Jennings, he grew up poor. His family moved to San Francisco when he was 11, and his skill as a poet earned him a Rhodes scholarship to study at Oxford University in England. A stint at West Point followed before Kristofferson landed in Nashville, Tennessee. Janis Joplin's recording of his "Me and Bobby McGee" finally gave him a breakthrough, after which he became a counterculture hero as well as a Hollywood leading man.

Merle Haggard

A relative outsider among the outlaws due to being from California, Haggard's tough upbringing led to a troubled early adult life that saw him serve time in the San Quentin pen. Later a core part of the Bakersfield Sound—the renegade West Coast movement that preceded the outlaws—alongside Buck Owens, his hard-nosed anthems included "Mama Tried," "Okie From Muskogee" and "The Fightin' Side of Me." In all, Haggard earned more than 40 No. 1 country hits, including "Pancho & Lefty" with Nelson.

Willie Nelson (seated) with producer Arif Mardin, sister Bobbie Nelson and drummer Paul English at Atlantic Records' Manhattan studio during the recording of *Shotgun Willie* in February 1973.

Back to the Basics

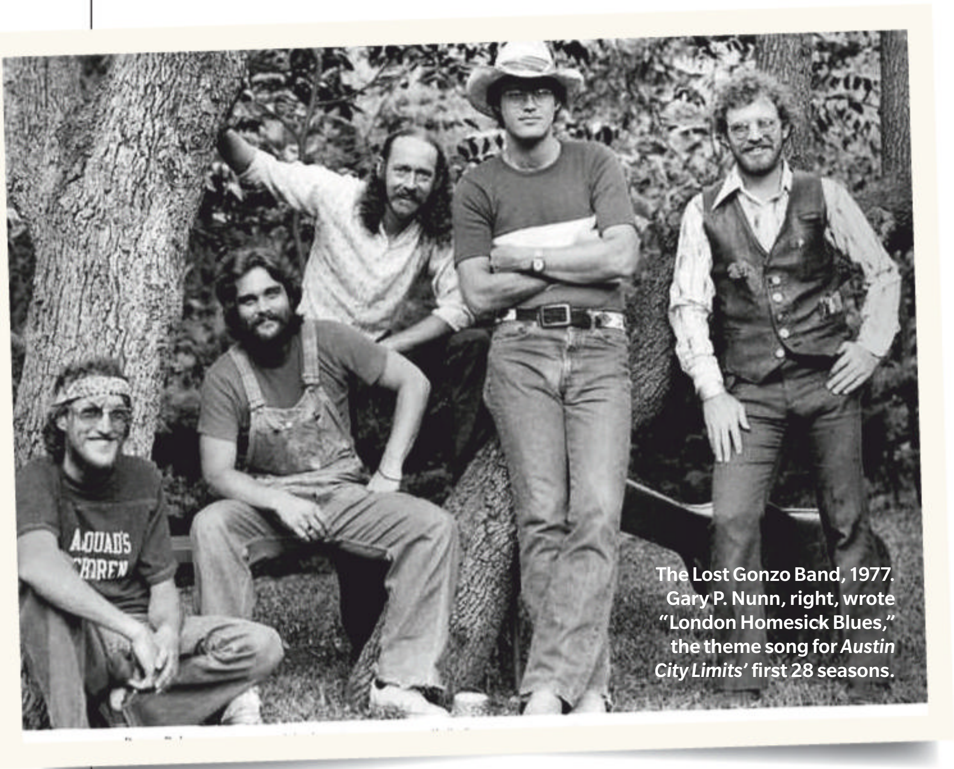
ONCE IN TEXAS, THE COUNTRY SINGER SET ABOUT BUILDING AN EMPIRE WITH TWO OUTLAW CLASSICS, *SHOTGUN WILLIE* AND *PHASES AND STAGES*.

> *"I knew I only had a few years left. I wasn't going down there to quit. I was going with a purpose."*
>
> **WILLIE NELSON**

The Texas that Willie Nelson returned to in the winter of 1971 had changed by leaps and bounds from the one he left a decade prior. From his new perch in Bandera, he got a regular gig at John T. Floore Country Store, a dance hall in nearby Helotes, and noticed an evolving clientele that included long-haired hippies and city kids venturing out to the remote beer joints. "Of course they got the s--- kicked out of 'em a couple of times," Nelson told author Robert K. Oermann. "But they kept comin' back. They kept showing up."

In the solitude of the Hill Country, Nelson took up golf and experimented with hallucinogenic drugs like LSD—often at the same time. His next album, *Yesterday's Wine*, bore the mark of those psychic journeys, a proper concept album about spirituality and the "imperfect man" that featured dialogue with God. But it was still the same old story, sales-wise. "It scared a lot of people," Nelson said. "RCA's reaction was, 'Who's gonna play this?'"

FAME Studios in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, is located just 130 miles from Nashville, but as an R&B epicenter was considered to be rival turf by the country music world. At Jerry Wexler's urging, Nelson recorded *Phases and Stages* there in 1973.



The Lost Gonzo Band, 1977. Gary P. Nunn, right, wrote "London Homesick Blues," the theme song for *Austin City Limits'* first 28 seasons.

The answer came not far away in Austin, Texas, where sister Bobbie—now three times divorced—played piano in hotels and country clubs. A flood of songwriters had taken over the coffee shops around the University of Texas campus, including Steve Earle, Townes Van Zandt and Guy Clark. Elsewhere, the country crowd blended with the rockers. Michael Martin Murphey, a Dallas native, had spent several years in Los Angeles gigging and writing film scores, but moved to Austin in 1971 and released *Geronimo's Cadillac*, which spawned a Top 40 pop hit with the title track. Doug Sahm, of Sir Douglas Quintet fame, also returned from San Francisco.

New to town was Jerry Jeff Walker, a New Yorker who had a No. 1 hit when Nitty Gritty Dirt Band covered his song "Mr. Bojangles." Tired of his own situation on the East Coast,

Jerry Jeff Walker

Walker found a comfortable niche in Austin, where he hooked up with the Lost Gonzo Band, a ragtag group of cowboys and farm hands that included harmonica player Mickey Raphael.

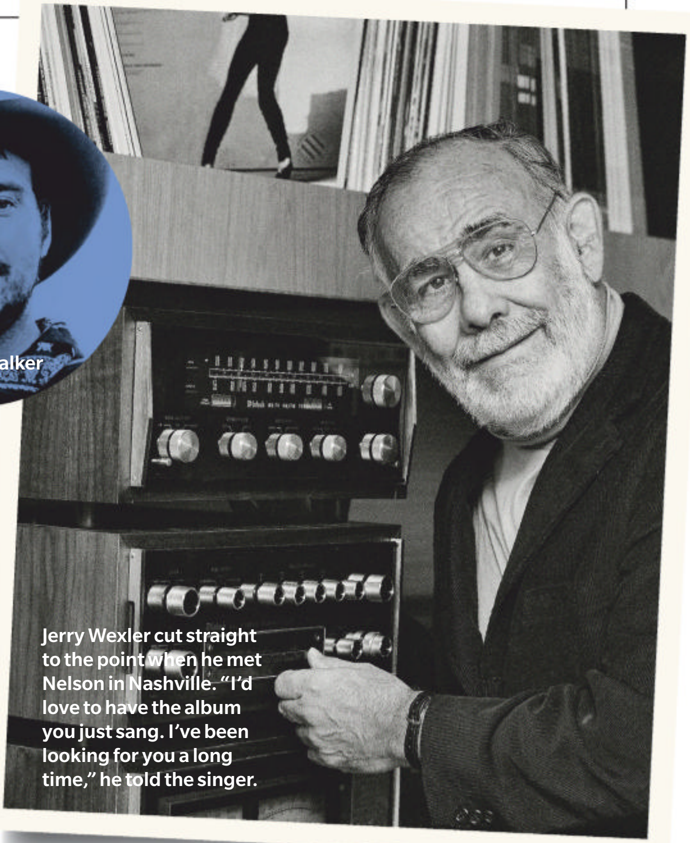
All these disparate factions came together at Armadillo World Headquarters, an old armory building that was converted into a concert space in 1970. Country acts rubbed shoulders with the Grateful Dead and Frank Zappa, and the crowds that showed up were equally enthusiastic about both. The Armadillo expanded with an outdoor beer garden in 1972, and was written up by national outlets like *Time* and *Rolling Stone* that labeled it the hub of a movement known alternately as "progressive country," "redneck rock" or "cosmic cowboy music."

That summer, Nelson, newly married to Connie Koepke and duly encouraged by his experience at the Dripping Springs Reunion (see page 30), left Bandera for Austin, where he promptly settled in at the Armadillo. He also adopted the local fashion sense, letting his hair and beard grow and donning loose-fitting T-shirts, blue jeans and cowboy hats. "I never did like putting on stage costumes, never did like trim haircuts, never did like worrying about whether I was satisfying the requirements of a showman," he wrote in his 2015 autobiography, *It's a Long Story: My Life*. "It felt good to let my hair grow. Felt good to get on stage in the same jeans I'd been wearing all damn day."

Nelson's arrival was a game changer. According to critic Dave Hickey, "He could hang out with [University of Texas football coach] Darrell Royal and the governor. He brought that real, hard-core constituency." Soon he was on the phone to Waylon Jennings, insisting he come play the Armadillo. Jennings wasn't prepared for the rowdiness that awaited him. "There was hippies and cowboys and everybody together and they were screaming and really getting off on it," Jennings' drummer, Ritchie Albright, told Michael Streissguth in *Outlaw: Waylon, Willie, Kris and the Renegades of Nashville*. "Waylon turned around and said, 'Go get that little red-headed son of a b----. What's he got me into?'"

Meanwhile, Nelson was still making trips back to Nashville, Tennessee, to do the rounds. At a party hosted by Harlan Howard, he met R&B legend Jerry Wexler of Atlantic Records. Wexler was an architect of the Muscle Shoals Sound and produced genre-defining hits for Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin and Dusty Springfield. He had recently signed Sahm and was looking to open a country division at Atlantic when he caught Nelson playing through the entirety of a new, as-yet-unreleased album, another concept record about a couple's divorce. Wexler was impressed and said he wanted Nelson to be his first country signing.

The catch was that Nelson wasn't out of contract yet with RCA. He found help on that front in the form of Neil Reshen, a bulldog manager from New York City who made his name representing Miles Davis. Jennings had recently scored a major concession with Reshen's help when Reshen negotiated new terms that allowed him to record his own albums with his own band and hand-picked producer, Chips Moman. With Reshen on his side, Nelson was able to finagle a buyout from his old deal and jumped ship for Atlantic. "It was fun," recalled Nelson. "They had so many buttons he could push. It opened their eyes to what was really going on."


Jerry Wexler cut straight to the point when he met Nelson in Nashville. "I'd love to have the album you just sang. I've been looking for you a long time," he told the singer.

> "There's Willie with his Martin, Scotch tape on the strings, an earring and pigtails down to his butt."
>
> JERRY WEXLER, PRODUCER

SHOTGUN WILLIE

How the rebel got his double-barrel moniker.

The wild and woolly reputation of Austin's cosmic cowboys had to do with more than having long hair or doing lots of drugs (both of which were true). They also loved their firearms—especially Willie Nelson and his crew. "If you didn't have a gun, we'd give you one," Nelson told *Texas Monthly*. Geno McCoslin, a gun-toting money handler, allegedly even dangled a Hell's Angel out of a helicopter over an altercation.

These tendencies led not only to one of his many nicknames but the title and title track of *Shotgun Willie*. The story started with his eldest daughter, Lana, being abused by her husband, Steve Warren. Nelson found out about it from her sister, Susie, and threatened Warren that he would "kill him" if the beatings didn't stop, making his point by "slapping him around." In retaliation, Warren rounded up his brothers in his pickup truck and proceeded to start a shoot-out at Nelson's Ridegtop, Tennessee, home. With the help of drummer Paul English and his Army-issue M1 rifle, the singer fended off the assault, shooting out the tires of the truck.

When Warren later returned to apologize, English coolly told him it was good they'd kept on driving. "Otherwise, I would've had to shoot to kill rather than aim to miss," he said.

A few years later, Nelson played peacemaker when a gunfight broke out inside a six-story parking garage where the band was unloading for a gig in Birmingham, Alabama. As Poodie Locke, his longtime stage manager, later recalled, the police had already shown up to the scene and had the assailants on the ground when Nelson walked off his bus with two Colt .45s sticking out from his cutoff jean shorts, telling everyone to calm down. "The cops put up their guns, the people get off the concrete and pretty soon Willie is signing autographs," said Locke.

In February 1973, Nelson and his band, joined by Bobbie as well as Sahm and his backing players, convened in Manhattan to record an album. They peeled off 31 songs in five days that were whittled down to make *Shotgun Willie*. The title track, complete with a verse dedicated to John T. Floore, plus others like "Whiskey River" and "Sad Songs and Waltzes," became instant staples of his repertoire, and marked an entirely new musical direction that mixed influences from rock, blues, jazz and Tejano with country. Nelson likened it to "clearing my throat." *Rolling Stone*, in a glowing review, called it "flawless."

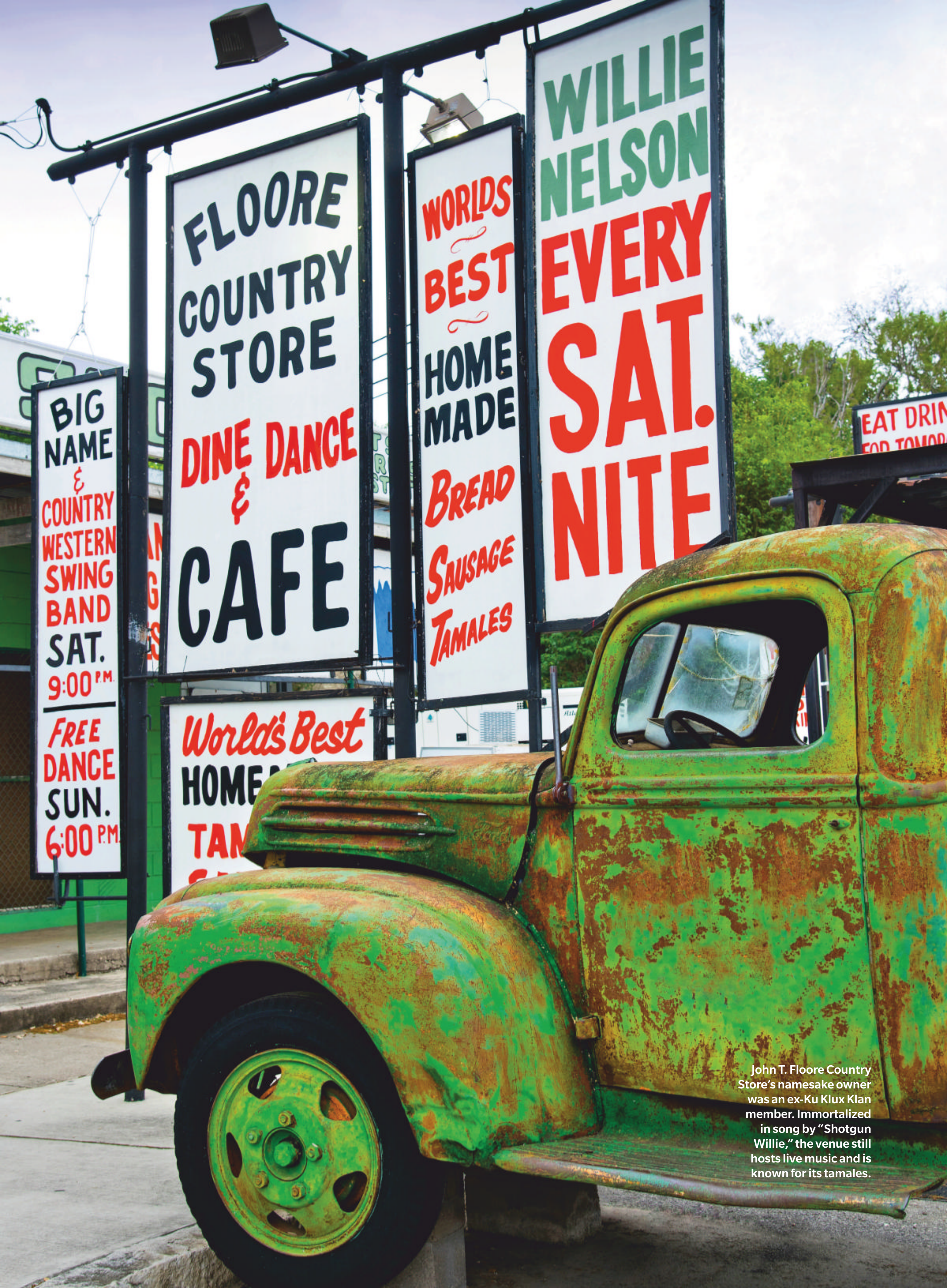
The Record Men had morphed into something else entirely, which was solidified thanks to the *Shotgun Willie* sessions. Bobbie became a full-time member, guitarist Jody Payne was hired from Merle Haggard's band and, thanks to an intro from Darrell Royal, Mickey Raphael was brought in, too. His harmonica essentially took over from steel pedal player Jimmy Day, whose drug and alcohol abuse led to a falling out with drummer Paul English (see sidebar, page 27). The pieces were falling into place.

Later that year, Nelson and Wexler were back in the studio, this time in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, with a group of session players. Nashville was outraged that Nelson would opt for R&B territory to cut an album, but the strategy worked. *Phases and Stages* was sparse and ragged, but all the more effective for it. These were the songs Wexler first heard played at Howard's house, and the resulting breakup cycle—split between sides, the first told from the standpoint of the wife, the second from that of the husband—was Nelson's best concept album to date.

"Bloody Mary Morning," released as a single from *Phases and Stages* in February 1974, went to No. 17 on the country chart, Nelson's first Top 20 hit in five years. Both albums performed reasonably well, with the latter reaching No. 34, and were praised by the country and rock presses alike. But Atlantic wasn't impressed. Nelson's sales were seen as underwhelming, and with no other talent on the roster, top brass decided to close down the country division in September. ("Willie who?" asked boss Ahmet Ertgeun.) Wexler, who lobbied hard to keep Nelson, was outraged and quit.

Nelson was once again out of work, but this time he wasn't concerned. He'd built something important in Austin, and done it all on his terms. That big breakthrough, at last, was just around the corner.

Kris Kristofferson referred to the song "Shotgun Willie" as "mind farts."


FLOORE
COUNTRY
STORE
DINE DANCE
&
CAFE
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BEST
HOME
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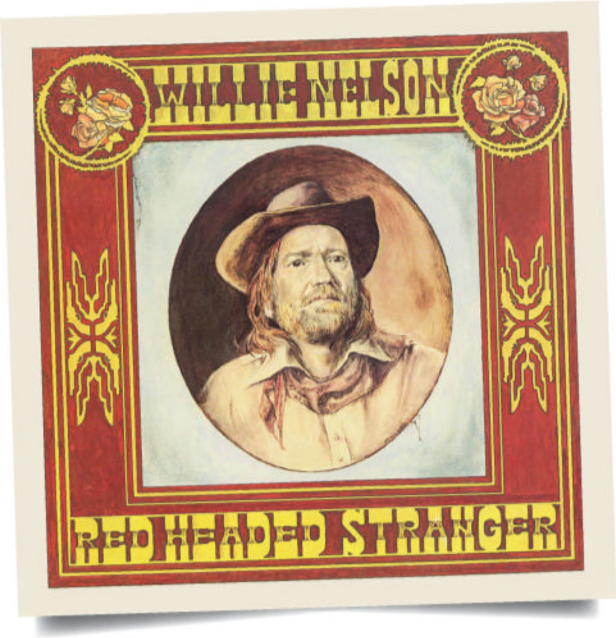
EVERY
SAT.
NITE
BIG
NAME
&
COUNTRY
WESTERN
SWING
BAND
SAT.
9:00 P.M.
FREE
DANCE
SUN.
6:00 P.M.
World's Best
HOME
TAM
EAT DRIN

John T. Floore Country Store's namesake owner was an ex-Ku Klux Klan member. Immortalized in song by "Shotgun Willie," the venue still hosts live music and is known for its tamales.

The Time of the Preacher

RED HEADED STRANGER BROKE THE RULES OF THE COUNTRY MUSIC BUSINESS. IT ALSO MADE WILLIE NELSON A SUPERSTAR.

> *"That's what Willie's music is all about. He doesn't need a producer. This is the way it should go."*
>
> **WAYLON JENNINGS**



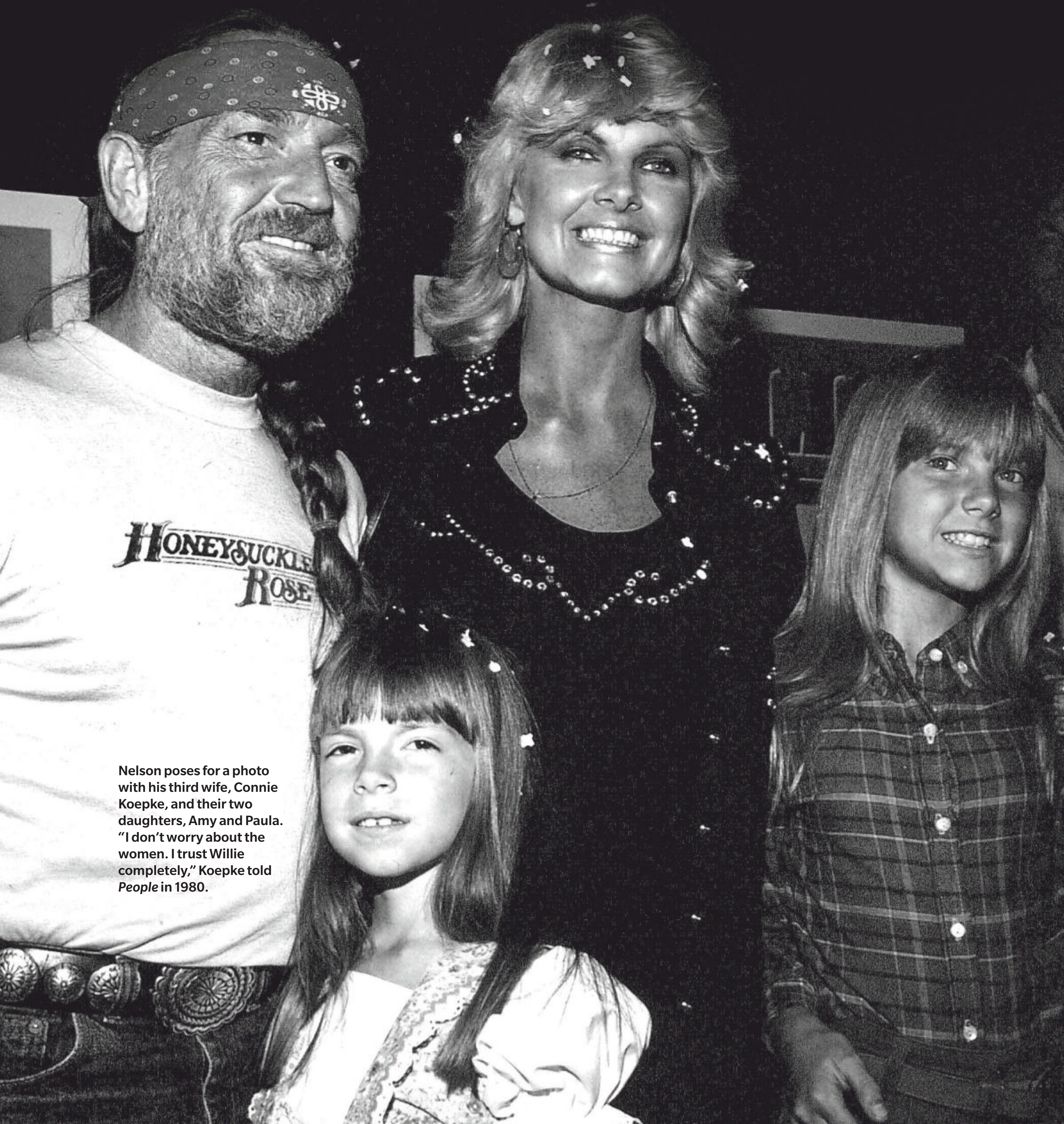
After 20 years of trying, *Red Headed Stranger* gave Willie Nelson the success he deserved—and for a total recording cost of just over $20,000.

When Willie Nelson was cut loose from Atlantic Records, he took a bounty along with him. As a parting gift, Jerry Wexler allowed him to keep his signing bonus, plus the masters to all the recordings he'd made while under contract, including an unreleased gospel album, *The Troublemaker*. What's more, Nelson's new business arrangements in Texas were paying big dividends: For the first time in his life, he earned over half a million dollars in 1974.

Despite still being a commercial question mark for a major label, he was primed to enter negotiations with Columbia Records, to whom his asking price was chump change compared to its big-name pop and rock acts. With the help of manager Neil Reshen, Nelson was given a $100,000 signing bonus and, far more importantly, complete artistic control over the albums he made with them.

These were much the same terms given to Waylon Jennings by RCA, thanks in part to Columbia's overtures to poach him. The result was a series of hit records,

> “He can’t say no. He doesn’t want anyone to think success changed him.”
>
> CONNIE KOEPKE NELSON, EX-WIFE



Nelson poses for a photo with his third wife, Connie Koepke, and their two daughters, Amy and Paula. “I don’t worry about the women. I trust Willie completely,” Koepke told *People* in 1980.

Nelson with one of his biggest fans, President Jimmy Carter. He and the Georgia native, here at the White House on May 15, 1979, made for odd bedfellows, but remained friends for decades.

starting with *Lonesome On'ry and Mean* and followed by *Honky Tonk Heroes*. Together with Nelson's two Atlantic recordings, this body of work was coming to be known as "outlaw country," for the way these Nashville, Tennessee, castoffs had managed to beat the machine at its own game.

At last Nelson had the freedom he'd always wanted. Now he needed an album to make use of it. In January 1975, he and wife Connie Koepke went to Colorado for a family ski trip. On the way home, he mused about the fact that he had no clue what to record. Koepke suggested "Red Headed Stranger," an old murder ballad that Nelson sang to his kids as a bedtime song. While they drove along, he spouted off more ideas that Koepke scribbled on a notepad. "The whole drive we didn't even get sleepy because we were so excited," she later said. By the time they made it back to Austin, Texas, the framework for *Red Headed Stranger* was in place.

Before the end of the month, Nelson took his band, now known as the Family, to Autumn Sound Studios, a recording spot in the suburbs of Dallas. The owner was friends with the Family's harmonica player, Mickey Raphael, and offered a free day of session time. Pleased with the results, Nelson came back for a proper go, primarily with the stripped-down accompaniment of Bobbie Nelson and Paul English. For the first time, Nelson's voice and its interplay with his guitar, Trigger, were put squarely on center stage.

The songs themselves were completely out of left field by the rhinestone-country standards of the day. Like *Phases and Stages*, this was a concept album, but one more austere and bloody-minded, depicting a crazed preacher who murders his wife and her lover, then kills again after fleeing on horseback. Comprised of a number of vignettes and even a piano instrumental played by Bobbie, it included further covers like Hank Cochran's "Can I Sleep in Your Arms" and Roy Acuff's "Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain." The initial recording bill came to a ridiculously low $4,000.

> "Did he make this in his living room? It's a piece of s---. It sounds like he did this for two bucks."
>
> BILLY SHERRILL, PRODUCER

Jerry Bradley

PLATINUM OUTLAWS

RCA's *Wanted! The Outlaws* compilation was country music's first million-selling record.

Nashville didn't take long to seize on the commercial potential created by *Red Headed Stranger*. Though Waylon Jennings had done well with his recent albums, sales paled in comparison to what Willie Nelson achieved with his Columbia debut—and those of Jennings' wife, Jessi Colter, whose "I'm Not Lisa" hit No. 1 in 1975.

So RCA producer Jerry Bradley concocted *Wanted! The Outlaws*, initially as a vehicle for Jennings and Nelson's old recordings in a flagrant attempt to latch onto the success of the label's ex-employee. Jennings gave his blessing, under the condition that friend Tompall Glaser be included. Before long, Colter was also brought into the mix. Bradley created an Old West-style warrant for the cover art and had Chet Flippo from *Rolling Stone* write liner notes.

The publicity stunt did the trick. Rolled out in January 1976, *Wanted!* went to No. 1 on the country chart and stayed there for six weeks. "People who'd never bought a country album in their whole lives bought that album," said Glaser. It eventually sold a million copies, beating *Red Headed Stranger* as the first country album ever to go platinum. The LP also spawned two hit singles, in "Suspicious Minds," a duet for Jennings and Colter, and "Good Hearted Woman," with Jennings and Nelson.

The pair wrote the latter song together over a game of cards in a Fort Worth, Texas, hotel room in 1970, with Connie Koepke jotting down the lyrics—although Nelson's contribution was reportedly only one line. First recorded by Jennings, RCA went back and dubbed Nelson's vocals for *Wanted!* as well as crowd noise to simulate a live show. However gimmicky it was, it landed them their first of five No. 1 songs as a duo.

> “All of a sudden, we were outlaws. I thought it was the funniest thing in the world.”
>
> WILLIE NELSON

When Nelson delivered *Red Headed Stranger* to his new bosses, they were perplexed, asking why he bothered to turn in a demo. “‘Ain’t no demo,’ I explained. ‘This is the finished product,’” Nelson recalled in *It’s a Long Story: My Life*. (Jennings called one exec a “tone-deaf, tin-eared son of a b----.”) Though his contract gave him final say in releasing the record, doing so came with a risk: If it flopped, there would be no second chance with Columbia.

Any such concerns proved completely unfounded. Released in May 1975, *Red Headed Stranger* was a blockbuster success, racing to No. 1 on the country chart and No. 28 on the *Billboard* Hot 100. By October, the album’s first single, “Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain,” became Nelson’s first single ever to top the charts, despite not even having drums on it. Reviews were similarly effusive. Writing for *Texas Monthly*, Chet Flippo said, “What Nelson has done is simply unclassifiable; it is the only record I’ve heard that strikes me as otherworldly.” *Rolling Stone* called it “extraordinarily ambitious” and gave Nelson his first proper profile the following January. The album stayed on the pop charts for 43 weeks and eventually sold more than 2 million copies, making it double platinum.

Seemingly overnight, Nelson became a household name. There was now no room to doubt his approach, however unconventional it seemed to the stodgy establishment. Austin, propelled by Nelson’s unhinged Fourth of July Picnics and the success of *Austin City Limits*, was the new home of counterculture cool, and he was its undisputed ringleader. “We’re all together, and we have the same idea about what we want to do, which is to do our thing our own way,” he told *Country Music* in 1976. Nashville, sensing an opportunity when it saw one, coopted the outlaw movement for its own marketing schemes, including cobbling together the *Wanted! The Outlaws* compilation (see sidebar, page 43).

Everything that Nelson touched turned to gold or, often, platinum. His next album, *The Sound in Your Mind*, released in March 1976, went to No. 1, and so did *The Troublemaker*, which Nelson pulled out of the vaults six months later. *To Lefty From Willie*—a tribute to one of his heroes, Lefty Frizzell—was released in the summer of 1977 and went to No. 2. “If You’ve Got the Money (I’ve Got the Time)” gave him his second No. 1 single. His fame was so all-encompassing that it lifted up his friends along with him. In April 1977, he took a verse on Jennings’ “Luckenbach, Texas (Back to the Basics of Love),” which also went to No. 1 and proved to be Jennings’ most culturally pervasive recording. They paired up again for a cover of Ed

WILLIE AND THE LAWMAN

A rundown of the Ambassador to Weedville’s most memorable busts.

Willie Nelson’s outlaw reputation was backed up by a number of real-life run-ins with the law. The culprit, in most cases, was his herb of choice, marijuana.

The first time he ran afoul of these troubles was in 1974 on a trip to Dallas. Three years later, he was busted by customs officials on the way home from the Bahamas with Hank Cochran. “I got deported,” he later remembered. “They said, ‘Don’t come back!’”

His next stop was the White House to pay a visit to President Jimmy Carter, who, Nelson said, “laughed about it.”

Highway patrolmen caused his next bout of grief when weed was discovered during a traffic stop outside Waco, Texas, in 1994. The hearing caused the singer to miss that year’s Grammy Awards. Nelson was then busted on his way to former Texas Governor Ann Richards’ funeral in 2006 while passing through Louisiana. This time there were hallucinogenic mushrooms found. His sister Bobbie Nelson, who was on the bus, got busted as well.

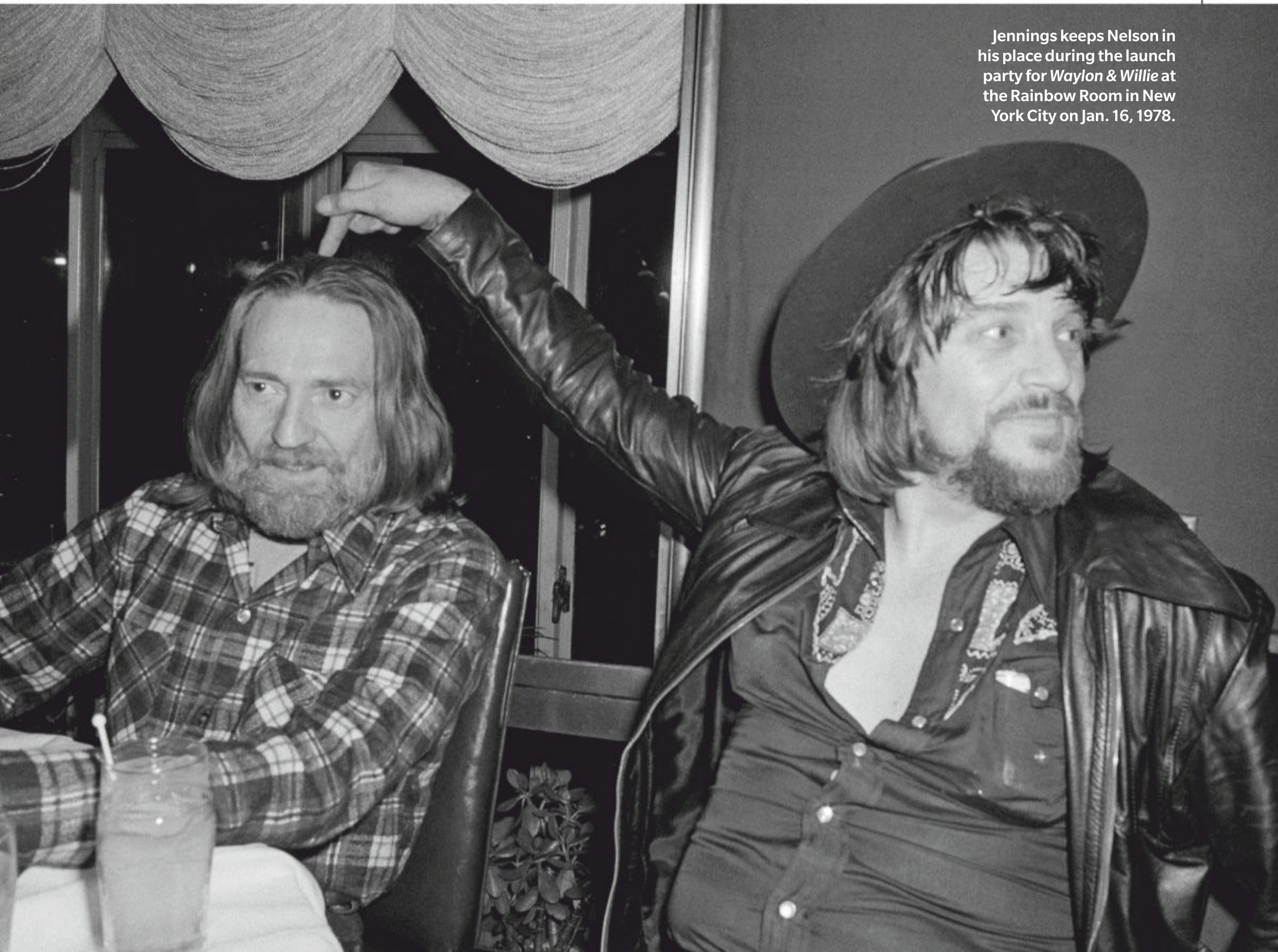
Finally, in 2010 Willie was caught near the Mexican border in West Texas for—you guessed it—pot possession. He was initially given a $100 fine with the caveat that he had to sing “Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain” to the courtroom, although that (allegedly joking) suggestion was dropped and the fine raised to $500.

Bruce's "Mammas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys." It topped the charts in January 1978, just like the duets LP it came from, *Waylon & Willie*. The pairing was such a juggernaut that the album followed an unprecedented alliance between RCA and Columbia, which agreed to let Nelson record with its rival label.

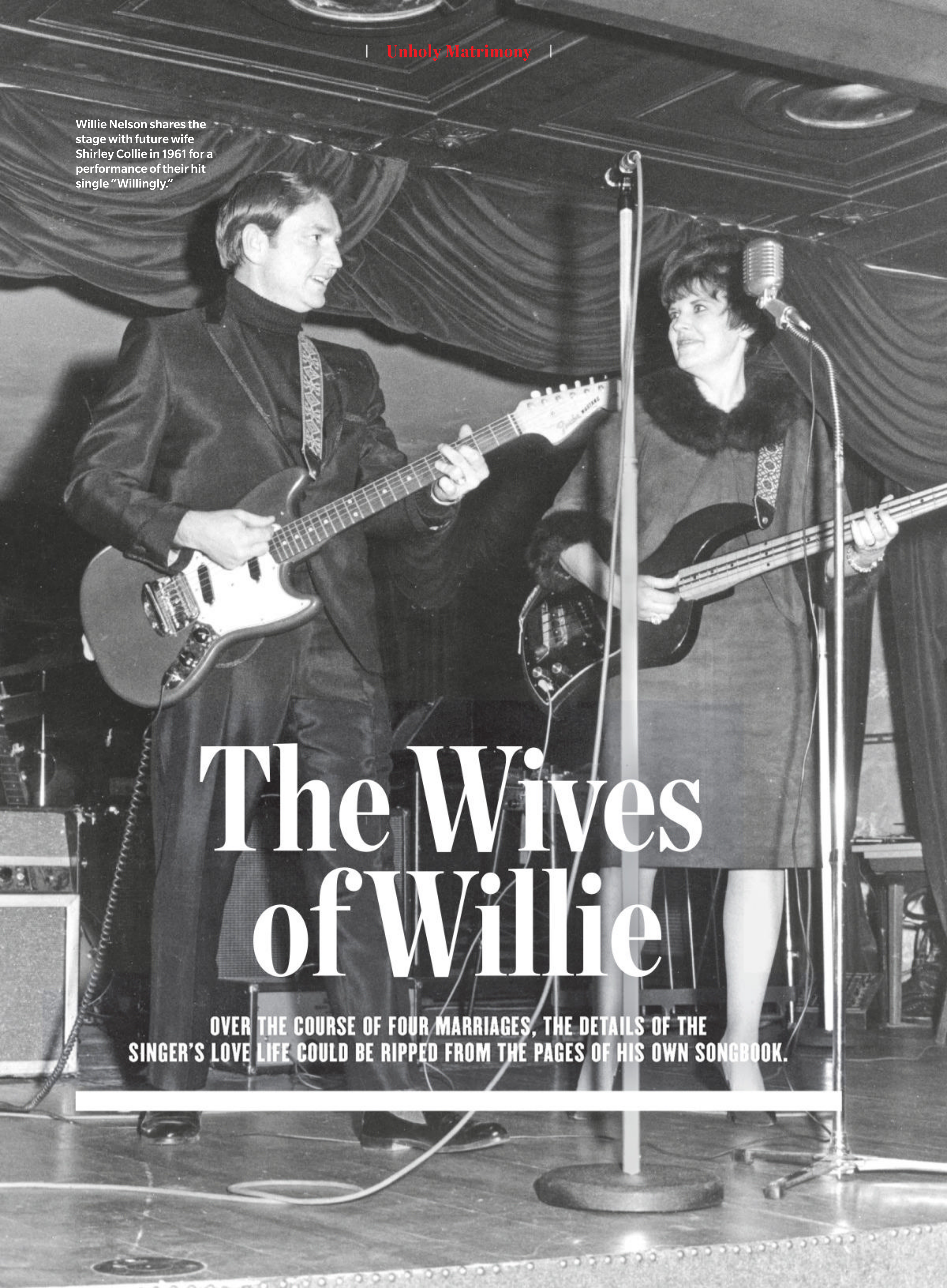
But trouble was brewing in Nelson's business dealings, and Jennings had an indirect hand in bringing it to light. The previous summer, manager Reshen had mailed a delivery of cocaine from NYC that was intercepted by the Drug Enforcement Agency on the way to Jennings in Nashville. Reshen's assistant, Mark Rothbaum, took the fall and was sent to prison. At the same time, Nelson, now earning money hand over fist, discovered that Reshen hadn't been paying his taxes, and that he now owed the Internal Revenue Service a considerable amount. "I can't be sure that taxes are paid and records are kept and also write songs and play music," the singer fumed. "At some point, you have to trust somebody." Impressed by Rothbaum's loyalty, Nelson fired Reshen and hired Rothbaum as his manager as soon as his sentence was served. It would take years to unfold, but the episode came back to bite Nelson in a very major way.

WILLIE NELSON
MAMMAS DON'T LET YOUR BABIES GROW UP TO BE COWBOYS
MUSIC FROM "THE ELECTRIC HORSEMAN" MOTION PICTURE

"Mammas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys" was Nelson's third single with Waylon Jennings to reach No. 1. A solo version of the song appeared in *The Electric Horseman*.



Jennings keeps Nelson in his place during the launch party for *Waylon & Willie* at the Rainbow Room in New York City on Jan. 16, 1978.



Willie Nelson shares the stage with future wife Shirley Collie in 1961 for a performance of their hit single "Willingly."

The Wives of Willie

OVER THE COURSE OF FOUR MARRIAGES, THE DETAILS OF THE SINGER'S LOVE LIFE COULD BE RIPPED FROM THE PAGES OF HIS OWN SONGBOOK.

Fourth time's the charm: Nelson stands backstage at Farm Aid in Hartford, Connecticut, with his current wife, Annie D'Angelo, in 2018.

Martha Matthews

Willie Nelson's first marriage was tumultuous, to say the least. Born in Corsicana, Texas, not far from Nelson's hometown of Abbott, Martha Matthews was three years Nelson's junior. She was married at the age of 14 and already a widow when she caught the aspiring singer's eye two years later at a drive-in restaurant near Waco, Texas. "It was love. My first full blast of love. The kind of love where you lose your mind and let your heart lead the way," Nelson said in 2019.

The couple wed in 1952 and had three children: Lana, Susie and Billy. While Nelson struggled to provide for his young family, Matthews lashed out with violent fits. In an interview with *People*, Nelson claimed she once tied him up and beat him with a broom after he came home drunk. "By the time I got loose, she'd lit out in the car with the kids, her clothes and my clothes. There was no way I could follow her naked, and that was kind of the end of it," he said.

They divorced in 1962. Nelson continued to support Matthews until she died of liver failure in 1989.

Shirley Collie

Like Nelson, Shirley Collie was already married—to Long Beach, California, radio DJ Biff Collie—when the two met in 1961. Unlike Nelson, she was already an established singer in Nashville, Tennessee, who toured with Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys and had a couple of country hits to her name. When Collie joined Nelson on "Willingly," their collaboration turned into an extramarital affair and later marriage.

Collie turned down the role of Pearl Bodine on the hit television sitcom *The Beverly Hillbillies* to tour with her new husband, but she soon became a stay-at-home mom. Then, in 1970, Collie was shocked to receive a bill from a hospital in Houston for the birth of a child that wasn't hers: Paula Nelson. Paula was the love child of Nelson and Connie Koepke. "I could see how that would upset her," Nelson said in a 2019 television interview. He and Collie divorced one year later.

Nelson and Connie Koepke, his third wife, were married for 17 years.

Connie Koepke

Despite having yet another marriage start off on the wrong foot, Nelson's third wife, Connie Koepke, proved to be a crucial steadying influence as he rose to international stardom. After getting hitched in 1971, she also welcomed another child, Amy.

Believed to be the inspiration for "Angel Flying Too Close to the Ground," Koepke's marriage eventually frayed as well, finally coming to an end in 1988 amid her husband's affair with Annie D'Angelo. Once again, the two remained on good terms. "You don't have to be selfish because your ambition and drive is for your family members as much as yourself," he told *The Telegraph*. "Along the way you pick up wives and kids and you are responsible for them. You don't discard them. There's no such thing as ex-wives, only additional wives."

Annie D'Angelo

Nelson finally seemed to get things right when he married Annie D'Angelo in 1991. The pair became involved while D'Angelo, 23 years his junior, worked as a makeup artist on the set of *Stagecoach*, but despite Nelson's entreaties she refused to commit to a relationship until well after his divorce with Koepke was finalized. The couple have now been married for 30 years, comfortably the longest of Nelson's four marriages. They have two sons together, Lukas and Micah, who are both musicians. "She's been with me through thick and thin. You can't ask for anything more than that," Nelson told *Rolling Stone* in 2014.

Having usually left his past wives to raise his kids, Nelson was a much more engaged parent with his youngest sons.

Marathon Affairs

In his 2012 memoir, *Roll Me Up and Smoke Me When I Die*, Nelson revealed he had an additional child. Besides the seven he fathered through his four marriages, there was also Renee, the love child of a long-lost flame, Mary Haney.

Then there was a $50 million lawsuit brought by an ex-girlfriend who said Nelson broke his promise to marry her. The suit alleged that they partook in a whopping nine-hour sex session, complete with a mid-coital somersault. "I'm not saying it didn't happen," Nelson told Kinky Friedman in a 1991 interview. "It might've happened. But you would've thought I'd remember at least the first four or five hours."

The Live Music Capital

WITH HIS ADOPTED HOME CITY ON THE UP, THE RED HEADED STRANGER PULLED AUSTIN INTO THE BIG TIME WHEN HE HELPED LAUNCH *AUSTIN CITY LIMITS* ON PUBLIC TELEVISION.

> *"There weren't too many shows like* Austin City Limits *back in the day. Here was a show that you could watch an entire live performance of a band—not just one song."*
>
> **DAVE GROHL**

That the reputation of Austin, Texas, took off at the same time as Willie Nelson's was no accident. The curious convergence of hippies and rednecks, singer-songwriters and cowboys, had all the right ingredients for a left-field brand of Texas counterculture that would appeal to the wider world. All it needed was someone with the vision to harness it all together. Nelson just so happened to be that person, and with the help of a plucky TV show called *Austin City Limits* he put the capital city on the music industry map.

Nelson knew that playing by his own rules required more than simply filling up gigs at the Armadillo World Headquarters. So in the fall of 1972, he lobbied local radio station KOKE-FM to expand its format and play country alongside rock music. The station finally relented with a late-night slot that debuted on New Year's Eve. Nelson obliged by recording a jingle for the station, and dropped in frequently for on-air appearances to spin records and perform songs. The idea of "progressive country" was becoming steadily more marketable.

The following year, Nelson approached Lone Star Beer rep Jerry Retzloff with a proposition. "He said, 'You're out to make Lone Star appealing to the youth crowd, and I have a problem with them because of the straight country thing,'" Retzloff recalled to *Texas Monthly*. "'I can't get the youth market to listen to my old country music because they think it's what their mothers and fathers are doing. They want to discover their own deal, something rebellious, personal. If we work together, I think we can both overcome our problems.'"

Retzloff agreed to buy ads promoting Nelson's shows, and while Nelson wasn't paid directly by Lone Star he was provided with free beer—a deal that more than paid for itself. "Back then I had about a $90,000-a-year backstage beer tab," Nelson said. Soon Lone Star was synonymous with the Austin music scene, its signage and long-neck bottles ever-present at area shows.

The moment was right to capitalize on the city's buzz. A *Time* magazine story in September 1974 raved about the scene, comparing the Armadillo to San Francisco's Fillmore, one of the West Coast's top music venues. It described the crowd at one show as "a curious amalgam of teenagers, aging hippie women in gingham, braless coeds and booted goat ropers swinging Pearl beer and Stetsons in time to the music."

> “What was the most visible cultural product of Austin? Music. It was obvious.”
>
> BILL ARHOS, *AUSTIN CITY LIMITS* CREATOR

One of Nelson’s concerts at the Armadillo aired live on Austin public television affiliate KLRN late in 1973. Bill Arhos, the station director, used that taping to get $13,000 to film a new TV series based around the local scene. Live music on television was a rarity in those days, mostly confined to variety shows. MTV was eight years away, CMT and TNN even further. Despite the meager budget, Arhos had access to a state-of-the-art facility on the University of Texas campus, Studio 6A, and a great name for the series that tapped into Austin’s fringe appeal: *Austin City Limits*.

Hindsight suggests Nelson was a no-brainer to kick off the show, but producers initially planned to premiere with a performance by B.W. Stevenson, who recently scored a Top 10 hit on the *Billboard* pop chart with “My Maria.” The turnout proved low, with only 150 people in the audience, so the episode was scrapped. Fortunately for them they had a backup in Nelson, who was already scheduled for a taping the following day, Oct. 17, 1974.

This time things went seamlessly. Nelson appeared for an in-the-round-style performance on a small platform stage surrounded by fans. It was a packed house. The loose, informal atmosphere was no doubt helped by the ready supply of free Lone Star, provided, of course, through Nelson’s connections. The set included “Whiskey River,” “Bloody Mary Morning” and “Good Hearted Woman.”

The 60-minute episode aired the following January during the PBS pledge drive, the same month *Red Headed Stranger* was recorded. The timing couldn’t have been better. Riding the wave of the new album’s acclaim, the pilot saw wider release in the spring and became an instant hit. The show was quickly picked up by the network, with Lone Star signed on as a sponsor, kicking off almost a year to the day from the first airing of the pilot, on Jan. 3, 1976.

Austin has traded on that reputation ever since. By the mid-1980s, it billed itself as “The Live Music Capital of the World,” which became the city’s official motto. In 1987, the South by Southwest music festival was launched, and

Willie Nelson, his hair not yet long enough to braid, charms the crowd—and Paul English—during the *Austin City Limits* pilot.

KEAHEY FLYING SERVICE
LONE STAR
12 FL. OZ.

One happy camper—er, cowboy. Nelson looks awful pleased to be drinking a (presumably free) can of Lone Star beer at the Fourth of July Picnic in 1980, held at his own Pedernales golf club.

is now the largest event of its kind in North America. Austin City Limits Music Festival followed in 2002, run by the promoters of Lollapalooza in Chicago.

Today, *Austin City Limits* is the longest-running music program on television, having wrapped its 48th season in February. Nelson has made more than a dozen appearances in that time. When the show moved from its original home to the Moody Theater in downtown Austin in 2012, the new venue sat along a street named after Nelson. Out front he's commemorated with a bronze statue. "There would be no *Austin City Limits* without Willie Nelson—simple as that," executive producer Terry Lickona said in 2019.

URBAN COWBOY

Before Luck Ranch took shape, the star built his HQ in downtown Austin with a venue and recording studio.

Willie Nelson's mutually beneficial alliance with the Armadillo came to an end in 1974 for reasons that no one could agree upon. The singer said it was because he wanted a cut of bar sales at his shows (the 'Dillo purportedly sold more Lone Star than anyplace in the world outside the Astrodome); the owners said Nelson's thuggish entourage brought in too many firearms.

Whatever the cause, Nelson had a backup plan when a group of investors (of which he may or may not have been a part) opened a rival venue, the Austin Opry House, in downtown Austin. The 1,700-seat theater witnessed the recording of Waylon Jennings' classic *Waylon Live* album, but when the Opry went out of business Nelson swooped in to buy it as well as the adjoining strip mall and 100-room hotel, the Terrace Motor Hotel, in 1977.

For the next decade, the Opry complex was a notorious haven for Nelson and his ilk, renting out rooms to friends, crew and musicians, including Lucinda Williams and Stevie Ray Vaughan. In 1984, he added Arlyn Studio, a three-room recording facility. Nelson finally cashed out in 1988, but stories lingered about seedy happenings. "We started hearing that one of Willie's guys buried $50,000 out [in the parking lot]," Wayne Nagel, who converted the hotel into a rehearsal space, told *Texas Monthly*.

Arlyn continues to operate as a recording space, while the living quarters were restored to their original function as Hotel Magdalena, which opened its doors in 2020.

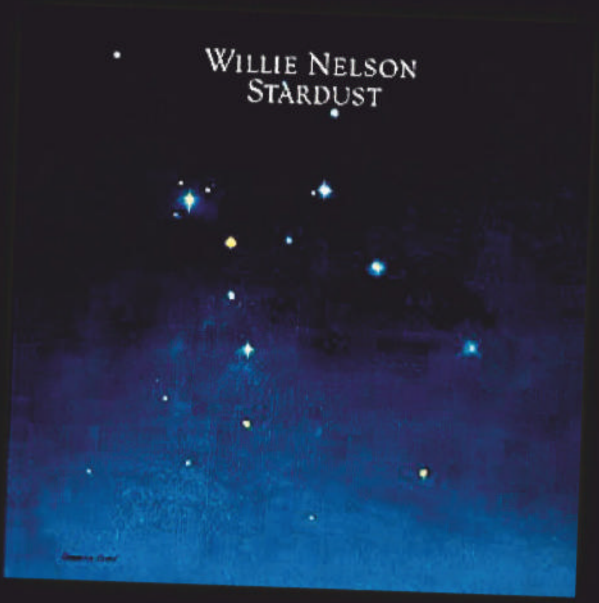
Willie Nelson teamed up with "The Genius of Soul," Ray Charles, on "Seven Spanish Angels" in 1984. The two became pals, even playing chess together, allegedly in the dark. "He won," reported Nelson.

The Great American Songsmith

THE COUNTRY SINGER FOLLOWED UP *RED HEADED STRANGER* WITH A COLLECTION OF STANDARDS, *STARDUST*, THAT BECAME HIS BIGGEST SELLER.

There was no stopping Willie Nelson as the 1970s drew to a close. It had taken two decades of trying and well into his 40s to achieve the critical and commercial success he craved, but all those years of struggle had paid off. To take advantage of his spoils, he purchased property outside Austin, Texas, where he built a new home base, bought a ranch in Colorado, a house in Maui and rented a place in Malibu, California. It was a far cry from those hardscrabble days picking cotton.

One of his neighbors in Malibu was R&B organist Booker T. Jones, leader of the famed Stax Records house band Booker T. & the MGs. Nelson had long wanted to record an album of his favorite pop songs from his childhood and asked Jones to produce it for him. Together with the Family, they laid down *Stardust*, a 10-song collection that drew on pop, jazz and soul standards pulled primarily from the Great American Songbook, in a home studio in December 1977. “We had a lot of unspoken understanding about bringing this music to the foreground in a soulful country way, and we were just enjoying it, too,” Jones later said.



The artwork for the *Stardust* LP was done by Susanna Clark, the wife of Texas singer-songwriter Guy Clark. It’s a depiction of the Pleiades constellation.

Ray Price remained a dear friend of Nelson's until "The Cherokee Cowboy," pictured above with his onetime mentee in 2003, passed away in 2013. "We're sort of like brothers," Price told *Rolling Stone*.

Columbia wasn't pleased. Nelson's fame had taken off thanks to his outlaw image, and this most definitely didn't suit it. The artist disagreed. "My audience right now is young. They'll think these are new songs, or a lot of folks will," he retorted. Once again, Nelson had final say—and once again, he was proven correct. *Stardust* became his biggest seller ever, topping the country charts upon its release in April 1978 and staying on the charts for an unbelievable 10-year run. It produced two No. 1 singles, "Georgia on My Mind" and "Blue Skies," with a third that went to No. 3, "All of Me." Like "Blues Eyes Crying in the Rain" before it, "Georgia on My Mind" netted Nelson the Grammy for Best Male Country Vocal Performance. The album not only demonstrated definitively his versatility, but proved that it was an integral part of his draw to wider audiences. To date, it's been certified platinum more than five times.

Nelson had reached a whole other level of celebrity, in a class as a vocalist with idols like Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald or Bing Crosby. He hopped from sold-out stadium gigs to glitzy Las Vegas revues on a private Lear jet. He recorded a collaboration with Leon Russell, a collection of Kris Kristofferson covers and his first Christmas record, *Pretty Paper*, named after his 1963 single for Roy Orbison. All of them were country hits. In 1980, he reunited with old friend and boss Ray Price for a covers album, *San Antonio Rose*, which went to No. 3. There were two more

THE GREAT ESCAPES

Nelson emerged unscathed and unfazed from more than one brush with death.

In his nine-decade journey, Willie Nelson would seem to have used up more than his share of nine lives. On at least two occasions, he's been lucky to escape the clutches of death.

The fire that destroyed his home in Ridgetop, Tennessee, in 1970 has gone down in Willie lore for reasons beyond the ripple effect it caused on his career. Yes, it led him to relocate to Texas, but more importantly, it inspired an act of heroism as he beat back the flames to rescue his beloved marijuana. "I wasn't being brave running in there to get my dope—I was trying to keep the firemen from finding it and turning me over to the cops," Nelson said in 1980.

An even more spectacular episode happened when the private plane Nelson was a passenger on crashed on an airstrip near Alamo Village in Texas, where his movie *Barbarosa* was filmed in 1982. The owner of the airport, Happy Shahan, did what any concerned friend would do: He called the media, telling them to hurry and to bring their cameras.

When Shahan and the news crews got to the scene of the accident, they were amazed to find the singer and his pilot stumbling out of the wreckage, largely unhurt.

Nelson, typically, played it cool. "It was a perfect landing," he told the gathered crowd. "I walked away from it, didn't I?"

albums with Waylon Jennings and a first with Merle Haggard, *Pancho & Lefty*, which went to No. 1 in 1983. In between he had two more chart-topping solo albums, *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* and *Always on My Mind*. Amazingly, given his early reputation as nothing more than a songwriter, Nelson went this entire stretch without an album of originals; 1983's *Tougher Than Leather* was the first in eight years.

Nelson on the set of *The Electric Horseman*, a film directed by Sydney Pollack, with Robert Redford. "He felt so comfortable with Redford," said Connie Koepke.

Nelson's appeal wasn't limited to his buddies in the country world, either. In 1983, he appeared on Carlos Santana's "They All Went to Mexico." The following year, he recorded "To All the Girls I Loved Before" with Spanish heartthrob Julio Iglesias. The song not only topped the country chart but reached No. 5 on the *Billboard* Hot 100, matching the highest Nelson ever went there. *Half Nelson*, the album it was released on, also featured an appearance by Ray Charles, with whom he sang "Seven Spanish Angels."

Soon Hollywood came calling. Nelson made his acting debut in *The Electric Horseman*, then landed his first starring role in 1980's *Honeysuckle Rose*, which earned him an Academy Award nomination for "On the Road Again" and pulled in $17 million at the box office. His acting was well regarded by directors Sydney Pollack and Jerry Schatzberg, and complimented by critics like Janet Maslin and Roger Ebert. "I never did know that you had to be trained to have your picture made," Nelson quipped to *People*. "Maybe that's the whole point—not knowing anything is maybe better than knowing a little." These early successes prompted a quixotic quest to bring *Red Headed Stranger* to the silver screen. The result, this time, was rare disappointment and public indifference.

All the same, Nelson exuded contentment. Personally, he'd cut back on booze and stopped doing drugs (besides marijuana). Professionally, he was the highest-earning live act in the United States, a perennial award winner and close friends with the president. He did his best to spread the wealth, especially to his band and road crew, but to friends and family as well. Stories were rife of him handing out Rolex watches or $50,000 checks to those who'd done him favors. "There were a lot of people sponging off him, even though he didn't look at it that way," said singer Johnny Bush. Daughter Lana estimated he only retained 10% of his annual earnings. The generosity extended to humanitarian efforts like Farm Aid, which he helped launch in 1985 (see page 70).

With the release of *The Promiseland* a year later, Nelson had produced 20 No. 1 singles and 12 No. 1 albums in a little over a decade—a remarkable run. Whether he realized it or not, the success wouldn't last, nor could the lavish spending. Life was once more destined to get very complicated.

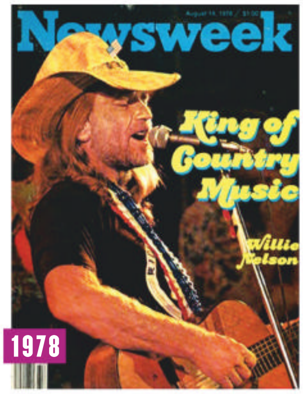
> **"Why be predictable? Great songs are great songs."**
>
> WILLIE NELSON

COUNTRY MUSIC
WILLIE NELSON
The Man Who Beat The System

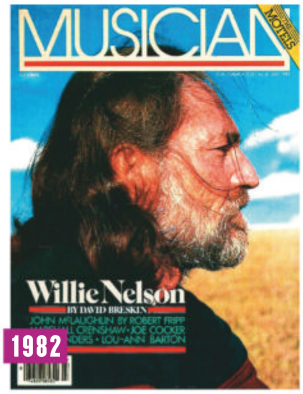
1976

Texas Monthly
Breakthrough In Country Music
Willie Nelson And The New Breed

1976


Newsweek
King of Country Music
Willie Nelson

1978


MUSICIAN
Willie Nelson

1982

Pretty Papers

COUNTRY AMERICA
Why WILLIE plays for the poor
TNN March Program Guide

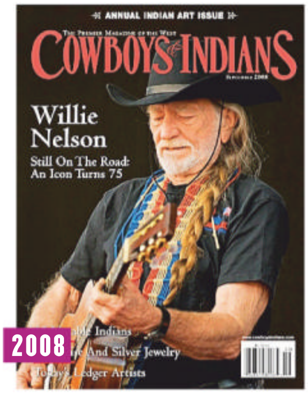
1990

TV GUIDE
WE SHOULD ALL BE THIS COOL AT 70!

2003

Tracks
MUSIC BUILT TO LAST
Don't Mess with TEXAS
Willie Nelson rides with Los Lonely Boys

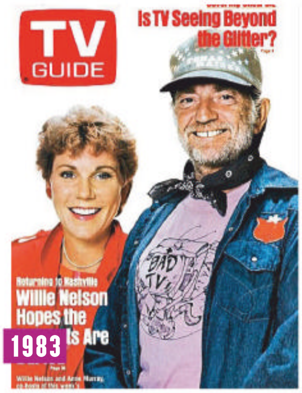
2004

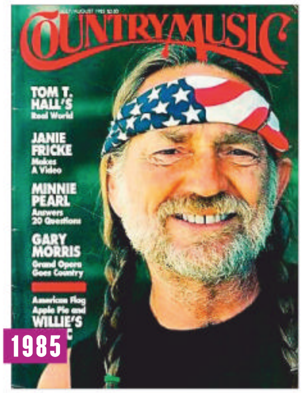

COWBOYS & INDIANS
Willie Nelson
Still On The Road: An Icon Turns 75

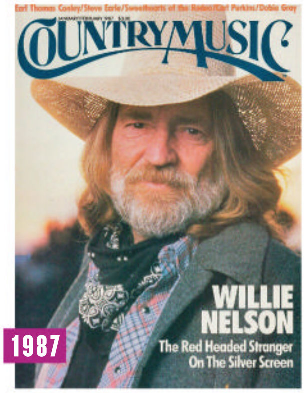
2008

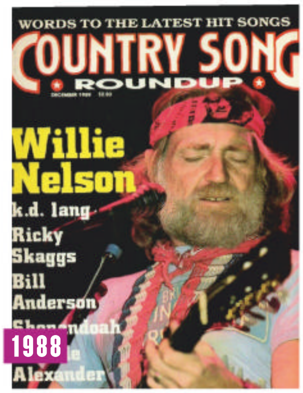
HIGH TIMES
WILLIE NELSON

2008


TV GUIDE
Is TV Seeing Beyond the Glitter?
Returning to Nashville
Willie Nelson Hopes the ... Are
1983


COUNTRY MUSIC
TOM T. HALL'S Real World
JANIE FRICKE Makes A Video
MINNIE PEARL Answers 20 Questions
GARY MORRIS Grand Opera Goes Country
1985


COUNTRY MUSIC
WILLIE NELSON
The Red Headed Stranger On The Silver Screen
1987


WORDS TO THE LATEST HIT SONGS
COUNTRY SONG ROUNDUP
Willie Nelson
k.d. lang
Ricky Skaggs
Bill Anderson
1988

FROM *COUNTRY MUSIC* TO *TEXAS MONTHLY* TO—WHAT ELSE?—*HIGH TIMES*, HE CUTS AN ICONIC FIGURE ON THE COVER OF MOST ANY MAGAZINE.

TexasMonthly
Yes, there is a Santa Claus.
2012

New York
BIG POTHEAD VERSUS BIG POT
2015

24 FAVORITE WESTERN EXCURSIONS
The Premier Magazine of the West
COWBOYS & INDIANS
JULY 2017
WILLIE NELSON
NOTES ON AN ICON'S JOURNEY FROM THE MAN HIMSELF, HIS SONS LUKAS AND MICAH NELSON, AND MORE
Cool-Down COCKTAIL RECIPES
FISHING Rocky Mountain National Park
SUMMER TRAVEL
OUR OREGON TRAIL
2017

AARP The Magazine
Willie Nelson
My #MeToo Moment
Where to Move
Broke From Cancer
2018

American Songwriter
THE LEGEND ISSUE
WILLIE NELSON
2018

COUNTRY MUSIC
The Genius Of WILLIE NELSON
2018

TexasMonthly
WILLIE
Now, More Than Ever
2020

All the Way to Washington

AT THE PEAK OF HIS POPULARITY, THE LEGEND FOUND AN UNLIKELY AUDIENCE WITH THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES—AND ONE OF HIS POT-SMOKING SONS.

ARTIST
LOVE IS REAL.

Willie Nelson has befriended several U.S. presidents. At left, he chats with Jimmy Carter on a train station platform in Plains, Georgia, on Sept. 9, 2004. Above, he poses with Barack Obama, with whom he sang "On the Road Again" on the South Lawn of the White House in 2014. And at right, Nelson performs at an East Room songwriting workshop on Nov. 6, 2014.

As Willie Nelson's stardom hit the stratosphere in the aftermath of *Red Headed Stranger*, it went hand in hand with a growing political clout for country music and Southern culture in general. While Southern cities like Atlanta worked to rebuild their image, post-civil rights movement, in the likeness of the New South, a new crop of politicians emerged who were primed and ready to court the youth vote like never before—none more so than Georgia peanut farmer and then-Governor Jimmy Carter.

Carter had no qualms identifying himself with the counterculture and was a die-hard fan of Nelson's. He even helped sell tickets for some of the singer's concerts in Atlanta. It wasn't just Nelson, either: As governor of Georgia, Carter invited Bob Dylan to stay as a guest at the governor's mansion. In the spring of 1976, his fledgling and nearly destitute presidential campaign received a pivotal boost when Macon, Georgia's the Allman Brothers Band played a fundraiser in his honor. Alongside fellow Southern rock acts like Lynyrd Skynyrd and the Marshall Tucker Band, the Allman Brothers gave Carter a never-before-seen dose of pop culture cred that reignited his hopes. (Running on a platform that included the legalization of marijuana certainly didn't hurt.)

Nashville, Tennessee, wasn't far behind. Country royalty like Johnny Cash, Loretta Lynn and Nelson, who also played campaign fundraisers in his honor, all endorsed Carter. He went on to defeat incumbent President Gerald Ford in that November's election. "I think that was one of the reasons I won, because I did align myself with characters like these, who were admired by millions of people around the world. It was a very popular thing to do," Carter told *Entertainment Weekly* in 2004.

Despite being 52 when he entered the Oval Office, that music was a fixture of his presidency as well. "When I was in trouble in the White House or needed to be alone, just to relax, I'm a fly fisherman, and I would tie flies in my study, where Truman used to work, while Willie Nelson's songs played on the hi-fi," Carter added. "So all

Willie
Country Music Association
Special Award
President Jimmy Carter

Nelson brought fellow singer and adopted Texan Charley Pride with him to the Oval Office to present Carter with an award for his support of country music on May 16, 1979.

Former President Bill Clinton hugs Nelson during the taping of the 2003 *Willie Nelson and Friends: Live and Kickin'* TV special, which was filmed at New York's Beacon Theatre and aired on USA Network.

> **"As much as any performer who ever lived, Willie has an intimate relationship with working people."**
>
> FORMER PRESIDENT JIMMY CARTER

the good things I did or, of course, all the mistakes I've made, you could kind of blame that on Willie."

Nelson, who has called Carter his "favorite president ever," was a frequent guest of the president's once he was sworn into office. After playing a concert on the Front Lawn in the spring of 1978, mere weeks after the release of *Stardust,* Nelson was invited back for a private performance that September. It was a joint party that also included another Southern fixture, NASCAR. Carter was unable to stick around as he was pulled away for Middle East peace talks at Camp David, but his wife, first lady Rosalynn Carter, joined Nelson onstage to sing Ray Wylie Hubbard's outlaw classic "Up Against the Wall Redneck Mother."

Two years later, Nelson took to the stump again for his friend, performing "The Star-Spangled Banner" at the Democratic National Convention during Carter's ultimately unsuccessful bid for reelection. (He forgot the lyrics.) On one of Nelson's other visits, he opted to leave Waylon Jennings—high and on four straight days without sleep—behind at the hotel. "Waylon was pissed!" band member Gordon Payne told author Michael Streissguth. "But we talked about it years later. He said, 'You know, it probably saved me more grief than I could ever imagine at the time.'"

Despite his close relationship with the 39th president of the United States, Nelson made a point of insisting he wouldn't get political in his music. "I sing to Democrats and Republicans every night. I don't want to do or say anything that's going to make half my audience get up and leave the building," he told *Entertainment Weekly.*

Still, Nelson and the Carters continued to feature in each other's lives long after the latter left office in 1981. Among their many public appearances together, Jimmy and Rosalynn appeared onstage with Nelson at a show in Atlanta in 1985, and again in 2012 when the three of them sang "Amazing Grace" together. Nelson also flew to Oslo, Norway, in 2002 to sing "Georgia on My Mind" when Carter received the Nobel Peace Prize.

The most enduring part of Nelson's visits to the White House, however, was a story that, for decades, went unconfirmed: That the "Red Headed Stranger" singer smoked weed in or on the White House one night while he stayed there. Nelson teased the tale for years without flat-out confirming it, writing in *Willie: An Autobiography* that he'd gone to the roof "with a beer in one hand and a fat Austin torpedo in the other." In *It's a Long Story: My Life*, he added a few more details, claiming a "White House insider" knocked on the door of the Lincoln Bedroom where he was staying and offered him a tour that ended up on the roof.

Finally, in 2015, writer Chris Heath put forward the name of Carter's middle son, Chip, as the unidentified accomplice during an interview for *GQ*. Nelson, apparently wrong footed by the suggestion, at last came clean, with wife Annie lending further corroboration. "It seemed like the thing to do," Nelson said. "We were there, and there it was, and uh...why not, you know? And they have a great view from the roof."

In that same article, Chip Carter confirmed the story as well, which his father, the former president, then acknowledged five years later in the *Jimmy Carter: Rock & Roll President* documentary. "It actually was one of my sons, which [Nelson] didn't want to categorize as a pot smoker like him," a grinning Carter said. "There were some people who didn't like me being deeply involved with people like Willie Nelson and Bob Dylan and disreputable rock 'n' rollers, but I didn't care about that. I was doing what I really believed."

THE CAMPAIGNER

The star has never shied away from stumping for candidates he supports.

For all of Willie Nelson's talk of political diplomacy, he's never been shy about expressing his political opinions. Jimmy Carter wasn't even the first presidential candidate that he supported. That honor goes to George McGovern, for whom Shotgun Willie played a fundraiser at Zilker Park in Austin, Texas—the modern-day location of the *Austin City Limits* music festival—ahead of his landslide defeat to Richard Nixon in 1972.

From there, Nelson played several campaign events for Texas Democratic Governor Ann Richards in the early 1990s. Others running for office to receive his endorsement included presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden, Bernie Sanders, Kinky Friedman and Wendy Davis, who staged her own unsuccessful bid for Texas governor in 2014.

Though Nelson's liberal preferences were plain to see, the matter came to a head in 2018 with his endorsement of Beto O'Rourke in the race for Senate. When the then-85-year-old announced he would play a rally for O'Rourke in Austin, there was widespread backlash from his conservative fan base. Undeterred, Nelson debuted a new song, "Vote 'Em Out," during the rally.

Nelson remained characteristically feisty when addressing the matter on the TV talk show *The View*. "I don't care. You know, they're entitled to their opinions and I'm entitled to mine," he said of his aggrieved Republican listeners, later adding, "Oh, I love flak. We're not happy till they're not happy."

Beto O'Rourke picks up an ax at Nelson's Fourth of July Picnic in Austin in 2018.

Once Upon a Time in Hollywood

A COLLECTION OF SHOTGUN WILLIE'S CAN'T-MISS BIG-SCREEN PERFORMANCES.

> *"I pretty much play whatever I am or whoever I am. And that doesn't require a lot of acting."*
>
> WILLIE NELSON

The Electric Horseman **(1979)**

Willie Nelson's big-screen debut came opposite Robert Redford in *The Electric Horseman*, but it's no exaggeration to say that, as wisecracking cowboy Wendell Hickson, he steals most every scene he appears in. Wendell is the sidekick to Redford's fugitive rodeo rider, Sonny Steele, and is always there with a bit of wisdom or a song when the moment calls for it—for instance, to help diffuse a standoff with "Mammas Don't Let your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys." The real highlight, however, is Nelson's delivery of the line, "I'm gonna get me a bottle of tequila, find me one of them keno girls that can suck the chrome off a trailer hitch and just kind of kick back."

Honeysuckle Rose **(1980)**

Hot off the box-office success of *The Electric Horseman*, Nelson scored his first leading role in the following year's *Honeysuckle Rose*, which saw him once again paired with director Sydney Pollack. This one wasn't such a stretch, as he plays a struggling, almost-made-it outlaw country singer named Buck Bonham. The script is solid if not memorable, but it serves as a top-notch vehicle for Nelson to do loads of on-screen singing, highlighted by a tearjerking rendition of "Angel Flying Too Close to the Ground." As a bonus, the Family Band gets to back him up, while fellow country stalwarts like Emmylou Harris also get screen time.

Barbarosa **(1982)**

A total dud at the time of its release, *Barbarosa*, Nelson's next leading role, has come to be much more well-regarded in the decades since it initially fell off into obscurity. He plays an Old West outlaw in this film alongside a young Gary Busey, who was fresh from his acclaimed appearance

Stagecoach gave Willie Nelson an excuse to work with Johnny Cash (top left), Waylon Jennings (top right) and Kris Kristofferson (crouching), but it "wasn't a very good film," according to Kristofferson.

> “It’s interesting how subtle his acting is. Willie Nelson is a gifted, understated actor.”
>
> ROGER EBERT, FILM CRITIC

in *The Buddy Holly Story*. Busey plays the sidekick in this instance as a young cowboy on the run from the law, who comes across Nelson’s titular character and becomes his understudy, learning about not just the code of the outlaw but life in general.

Songwriter (1984)

As the title of the film suggests, *Songwriter* finds Nelson back in similar territory to *Honeysuckle Rose*, and perhaps hitting even closer to home this time as his character, another struggling musician, tires of selling off his material for far less than he should in the hope of making some kind of professional breakthrough. There are plenty more fine performances in this comic drama, bolstered this time by co-star and soon-to-be-fellow Highwayman Kris Kristofferson.

Stagecoach (1986)

An unabashed publicity vehicle for the Highwaymen, *Stagecoach*, a made-for-TV remake of the John Wayne classic, is just a hell of a lot of fun. All four of the band members are there—Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings, Kristofferson and Nelson, as none other than Doc Holliday—which makes for plenty of amusement in itself, as only two of them ever made serious turns at being actors. Yet again there are cameos aplenty, with wives June Carter Cash and Jessi Colter as well as fellow outlaw singer David Alan Coe. As a bonus, this film bears the additional historical import of introducing Nelson to his fourth wife, Annie D’Angelo.

Red Headed Stranger (1986)

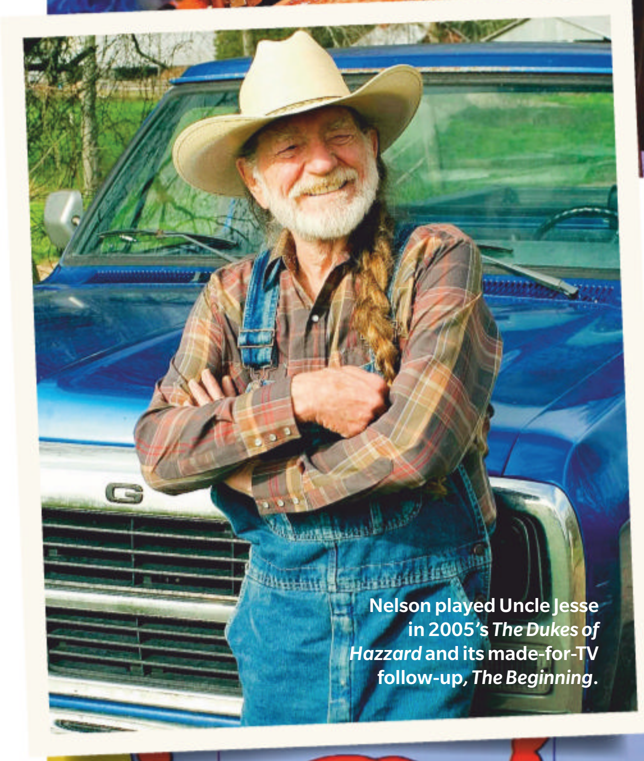
Not content to play the roles that were handed to him, Nelson dreamed of spearheading his own project—which, of course, was almost bound to be a Western. *Red Headed Stranger* was inspired by his album of the same name and written by William Witliff, with an initial screenplay ready as early as 1979. The pair shopped it around to major studios, with Universal taking the bait and approving a $14 million budget, with the caveat that they wanted Redford as Rev. Julian Shay. After a few years of dragging along, negotiations finally fell apart, the studio lost interest and Nelson and Witliff took matters into their own hands, filming it with Nelson as the lead for HBO. Not exactly the most thrilling entry in his canon, it’s nonetheless essential viewing for any die-hard fan.

As Johnny Dean in *Wag the Dog*, Nelson delivers such memorable pro-war anthems as “I Guard the Canadian Border” and “Good Old Shoe.”

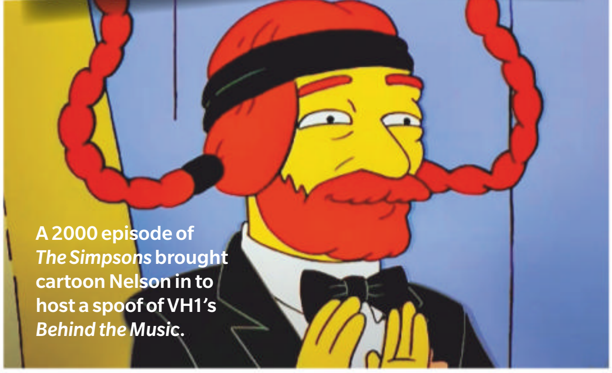
Wag the Dog (1997)

More than a decade after Nelson’s most serious run at Hollywood had come to an end, the singer, still not fully emerged from the hangover of his IRS bust, made an unlikely return in this late-’90s political dark comedy about a made-up war concocted to trick the public. Nelson, a wily but washed-up singer, plays an alternate-reality version of himself who gladly signs on to write and sing the rabble-rousing anthem intended to sway public opinion and rile up feelings of patriotism for this faux conflict.

The Muppet Show's the Electric Mayhem gave the Family Band a run for their money when they played "On the Road Again" with Nelson in 2016.



Nelson played Uncle Jesse in 2005's *The Dukes of Hazzard* and its made-for-TV follow-up, *The Beginning*.



A 2000 episode of *The Simpsons* brought cartoon Nelson in to host a spoof of VH1's *Behind the Music*.

JACK-OF-ALL ROLES

Willie Nelson's acting oeuvre includes plenty of memorable appearances on TV.

If Willie Nelson never quite reached the big time in Hollywood, he still made quite an impression, with a number of later cameos in films like *Half Baked*, *The Dukes of Hazzard* and *Zoolander II*. But he's been equally prolific on the small screen.

One of his first classic appearances was on *Miami Vice* in the 1986 episode "El Viejo." He later popped up in another cop buddy program, *Nash Bridges*, where he got to rub shoulders with fellow stoner Cheech Marin. He also appeared on *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, proving he could never get too far away from the Old West.

In 2002, he had a turn as a murder suspect in the *Monk* series premiere.

Nelson, however, can still be entertaining when just plain playing himself. He did this as a cartoon version of himself in *King of the Hill*, which celebrated the mundanity and inanity of suburban Texas life, where he was held up with godlike reverence but really just another of the back-alley rednecks.

He was animated once again in an episode of *The Simpsons*. But he also memorably played the straight man—for once in his life—when he appeared on *The Muppets*, where he led a sing-along surrounded by Dr. Teeth and the Electric Mayhem—characters who were even stranger and more colorful (literally) than his real-life entourage.

At Home With Willie

THE LEGEND'S SPRAWLING RANCH OUTSIDE AUSTIN, TEXAS, IS A REFLECTION OF HIS MANY PASSIONS AND CAUSES.

On the rare occasions that he's not on the road, Willie Nelson spends much of his time at an idyllic 700-acre ranch in Spicewood, Texas, called Luck Ranch. Located about 30 miles west of Austin in the Texas Hill Country, the estate is home to far more than the log cabin Willie and wife Annie D'Angelo reside in. There's a golf course, a recording studio and even an Old West town, which locals refer to collectively as Willie World. "When you're here, you're in Luck," Nelson is fond of saying. "When you're not here, you're out of Luck." For those who feel lucky, here are the must-see attractions.

LUCK OPRY HOUSE
Tito's Handmade VODKA Saloon

> “One of the reasons I like Texas is because there’s no one in control.”
>
> WILLIE NELSON

Austin Opry House
WIN A SHIRT

Fans flock to Willie Nelson’s personal property each year to attend his Luck Reunion, which is held during South by Southwest. The Old West saloon, dubbed the Austin Opry House, is named for a venue he once owned.

Part of the movie set from *Red Headed Stranger*, the Luck, Texas, chapel plays host to weddings, Easter gatherings, live music and movie screenings under the auspices of Luck Cinema.

NDAY SERVICE
8:30 a .m. AND 11:00 a.m.
EATURING
WILLIE NELSON
OBBIE NELSON
AND
HE BELLS OF JOY

Luck, Texas

As a kid, Nelson dreamed of owning an Old West town. Filming the big-screen adaptation of *Red Headed Stranger* in the mid-’80s gave him the excuse to make it a reality. Luck, Texas, was built as the movie set and includes a church, a bank, a dance hall, a jailhouse and a general store dubbed Luck World Headquarters. The script originally called for the set to be burned down, but Nelson rewrote it to preserve the town, which continues to stand despite some damage incurred by a storm in 2014. It even plays host to Luck Reunion, a one-day music festival limited to 2,000 people held each March during South by Southwest.

Pedernales Cut-N-Putt

First operated as a private country club, Pedernales—named for the nearby tributary to the Colorado River—is a nine-hole golf course that Nelson purchased in 1979. “I’ve always wanted a golf course where I could set the pars,” he joked at the time. An avid golfer, Nelson lost Pedernales to the IRS in the early ’90s after being busted for missing back taxes, but raised the funds to buy it back a year later. Open to the public for ticketed play, the complex also includes tennis courts, a swimming pool and condos. Its motto? “No Shirt, No Shoes, No Problem.”

Pedernales Recording Studio

When Nelson bought up the country club, he cleared out the former clubhouse and restaurant and hired producer

Nelson tends to two of the dozens of rescue horses he keeps on his ranch in Texas. “They get hand-fed twice a day,” he has said. “So they’re happy horses.”

Chips Moman to convert it into a 48-track recording studio. Among the albums that Nelson recorded at Pedernales was his 1983 collaboration with Merle Haggard, *Pancho & Lefty*. Dolly Parton, Ray Charles and Julio Iglesias all recorded there with him as well. It was open for public bookings until reverting to being Nelson's private facility in 2012.

Wild Horses

In 2006, Nelson lent his voice to efforts urging Congress to ban the slaughter of horses in the United States. While those efforts proved unsuccessful in passing legislation, Nelson's work didn't stop there. His ranch is now home to more than 70 rescue horses that he saved from slaughter. "My horses are probably the luckiest horses in the world," he said. So close is this subject to Nelson's heart that in 2019 he released *Ride Me Back Home*, an album titled after a namesake song that was inspired by his rescued horses.

Sustainable Farming

A longtime advocate for farmers, sustainability and efforts to combat climate change, Nelson brought those efforts home in 2020 through a new tie-up with local regenerative agriculture firm TerraPurezza. The first industrial-scale company of its kind, TerraPurezza's owners, Tina and Orion Weldon, connected with Nelson through D'Angelo, whom they met at a nearby farmer's market. Luck Ranch's land is already being fertilized by free-range pigs. Besides Nelson acting as a spokesperson, longer-term plans include building schools, training facilities and offices on the property. "They are thinking about this in terms of a legacy approach," Orion Weldon told *The Austin Chronicle*.

Poodie's Is the Place

Though not a part of Nelson's property, the nearby Poodie's Roadhouse is a fixture of the area and an extended part of the Nelson family. Named for Poodie Locke, a onetime stage manager of Nelson's and one of his closest confidantes who bought the bar in 1997, it's located just down the road from the ranch. Over the years Nelson was known to drop in for informal performances. Even after Locke's death in 2009 it remained a go-to afterparty spot for Nelson's gatherings, including Luck Reunion.

Aloha, Willie

Nelson also spends time at a second home on the island of Maui in Hawaii. Referring to it as his "little hideout on the ocean," he spends his time swimming, golfing and playing cards with friends at his clubhouse, Django's Orchid Lounge. His youngest sons, Lukas and Micah, spent most of their childhoods here, away from the bustle of Willie World. Nelson's famous neighbors and poker buddies in Maui include movie stars Woody Harrelson and Owen Wilson.

WILLIE'S HOME ON WHEELS

The eternal wanderer is never more at ease than on his tour bus.

No matter his physical address, Willie Nelson's home is always more transient: wherever his beloved tour bus, the Honeysuckle Rose, happens to be. Known to sleep on the bus while his band and crew stay in hotels, Nelson is even said to sometimes spend his nights on board while at home.

There have been at least five versions of the Honeysuckle Rose since the first was custom built by Florida Coach in 1983. That one was destroyed in an accident seven years later, though the interior was salvaged for use in its replacement. In 2005, Nelson switched from using fossil fuels to biodiesel. The last known update happened in 2013.

The Honeysuckle Rose is so synonymous with Nelson that owning an authentic used one became its own mini-farm industry. In 2014, a bus purported to be his sold at auction for $100,000. It later emerged that it was a similar bus previously used by Paul English. (Besides English's bus, known as Me & Paul, there are at least two more used by the band and crew, Red Headed Stranger and Warrior.) Me & Paul is now available for rentals and private events in Texas.

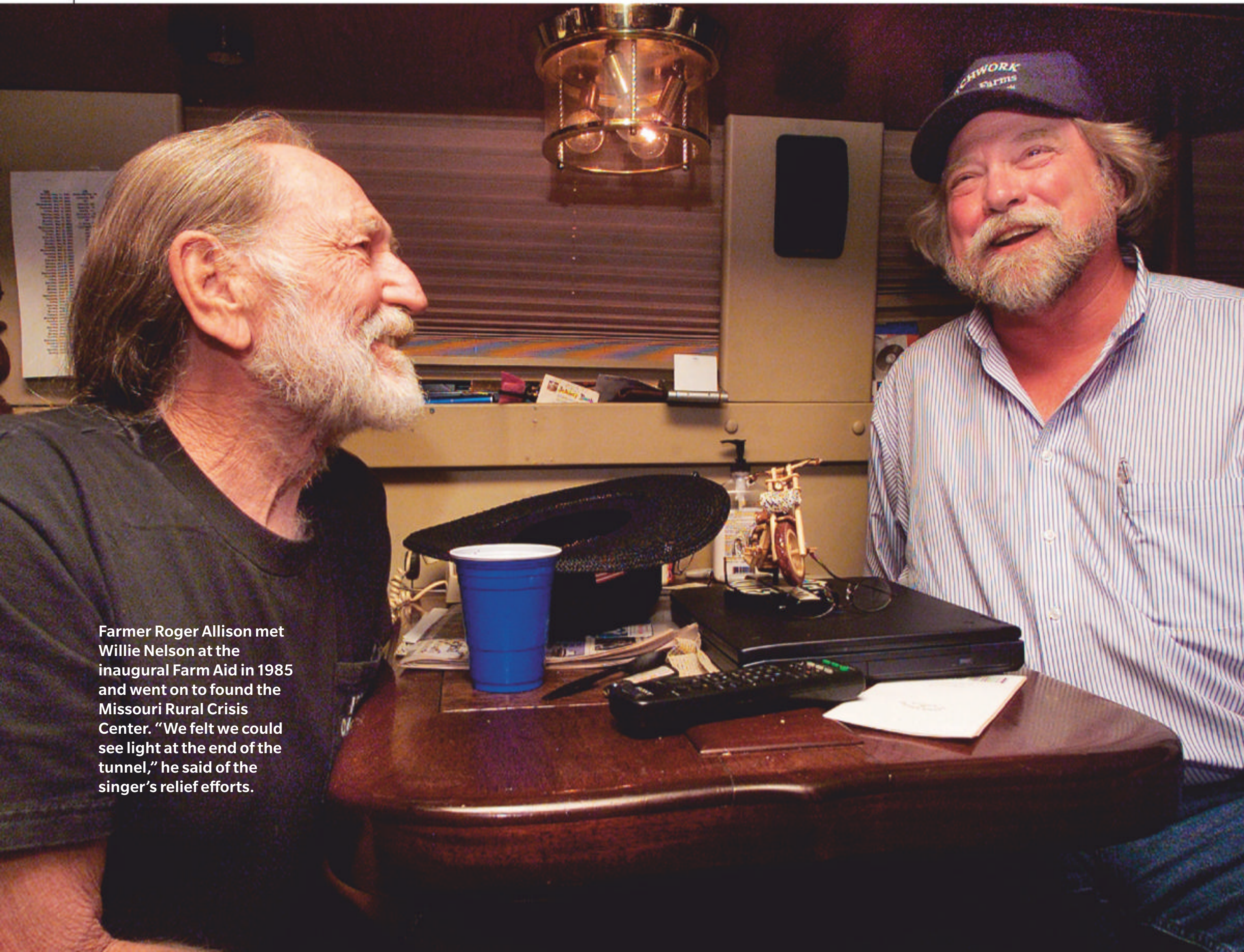
Getting the gig as Nelson's driver is no less coveted than one of his buses. Gates "Gator" Moore, the first driver to log over 1 million miles chauffeuring the same artist, has done the driving for more than 40 years. Moore has shared the role with only one person, Tony Sizemore, his right-hand man since the early '80s.

Honeysuckle Rose

Heart of Gold

THE COUNTRY STAR TOOK CENTER STAGE AS THE VOICE FOR AMERICAN FARMERS WHEN HE LAUNCHED THE ANNUAL FARM AID BENEFIT CONCERT IN 1985.

> *"We have to keep letting farmers know that we believe in them. You can do something to change the world just by changing the food you eat."*
>
> NEIL YOUNG



Farmer Roger Allison met Willie Nelson at the inaugural Farm Aid in 1985 and went on to found the Missouri Rural Crisis Center. "We felt we could see light at the end of the tunnel," he said of the singer's relief efforts.

The mythology of Farm Aid often begins with Bob Dylan, onstage at the massive Live Aid concert at JFK Stadium in Philadelphia in July 1985 and angering producer Bob Geldof by veering off message from global to local concerns.

"Wouldn't it be great if we did something for our own farmers right here in America?" Dylan, the headliner, wondered aloud in the middle of the festival created to raise funds for famine relief in Ethiopia. But that's not actually the beginning of Farm Aid's origin story. It starts, instead, with Willie Nelson's empathetic heart.

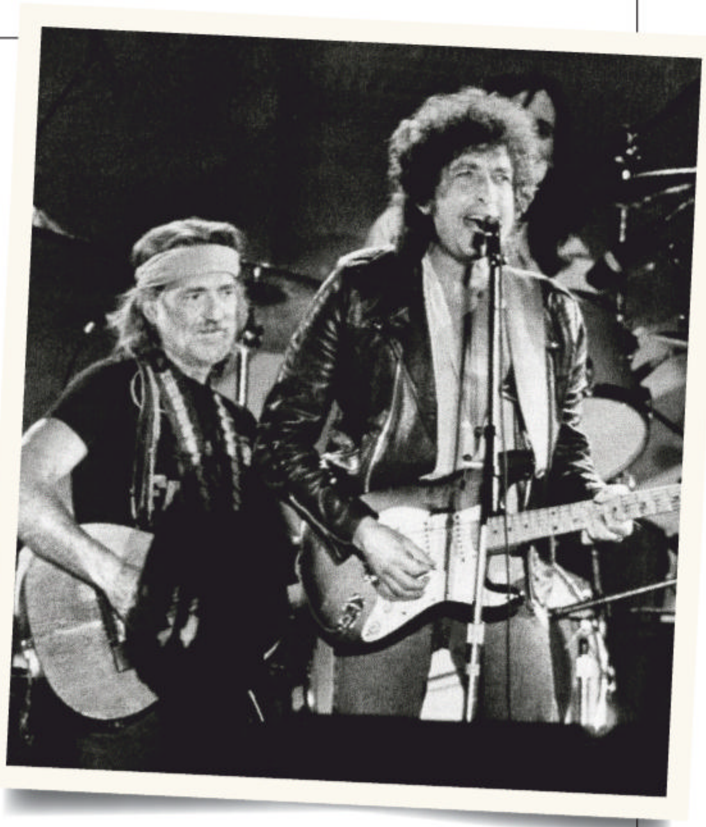
Nelson had been thinking about ways to help out on the domestic front for years. After all, family farms in his home state of Texas and beyond had been disappearing as mortgage interest rates rose and crop prices, as well as foreign demand for their product, dropped. Farmers were suffering, losing not only their livelihoods, but their entire way of life. Nelson, who grew up active in the Future Farmers of America and showed cattle and pigs at the county fair as a child, couldn't ignore it. When he gathered with his fellow superstars to record "We Are the World" at the beginning of 1985, he brought up a concept with Ray Charles. What if they could figure out a way to help at home, he asked?

Alongside John Mellencamp and Neil Young, Farm Aid easily blossomed from that kernel of an idea into a full-scale festival in mere months, gathering nearly 90,000 fans for over 15 hours of music on Sept. 22, 1985, in Champaign, Illinois. It sold out in less than a day, and reached millions of households across America through the TNN broadcast and simulcast on radio. Nelson and his team didn't know it would end up a tradition nearly 40 years running, but they knew they'd keyed into some lifesaving magic for those tragically underserved and underrecognized American farmers.

Though it was mostly billed by the press as a country concert, the first Farm Aid didn't just limit itself to one genre: Merle Haggard and Tanya Tucker shared billing with the likes of Lou Reed, the Beach Boys (who played a 20-minute medley), California punk band X, Sammy Hagar, B.B. King, Joni Mitchell and Bon Jovi, who debuted a song called "The Heart of America," written specifically for the day. The Highwaymen, Nelson's band of brothers with Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings and Kris Kristofferson (see sidebar, page 72), assembled sans Kristofferson to sing their namesake anthem with Glen Campbell, who wore an "Arkansas Is a Natural" T-shirt, subbing for the absent singer. Even by today's festival standards, it was a massive lineup only the likes of Nelson could assemble and set a tradition for special collaborations and song debuts: In 1990, Guns N' Roses played "Civil War" at Farm Aid for the first time.

Dylan took the stage at 10:30 p.m. for six songs backed by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers (and Nelson, too), finishing his set, appropriately, with "Maggie's Farm." The day culminated with Nelson's festival finale at well past midnight, as fireworks exploded across a sky that had cleared up from the day's occasional rain showers, which attendees took in stride, making bright orange ponchos as prevalent as American flags waving above their heads.

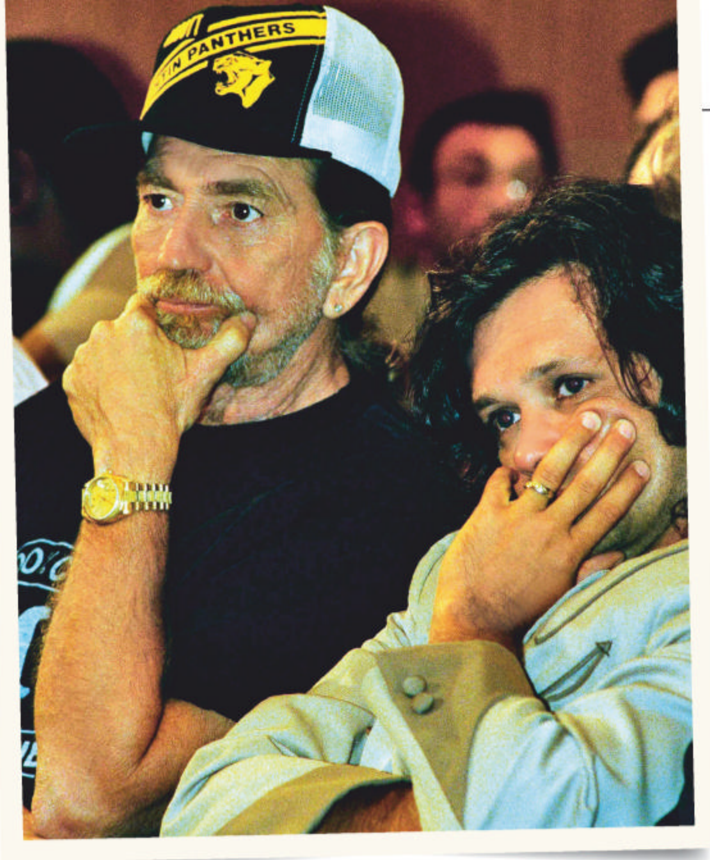
That wasn't the only time Nelson appeared onstage, of course. Throughout the day, he was a consistent presence,



Bob Dylan was one of more than 50 artists to appear at the first edition of Farm Aid, which took place at the University of Illinois football stadium in September 1985.

"Nelson told me, 'You should pay attention to the public and your fans.' It was a teachable moment."

JOHN MELLENCAMP



Nelson's support of American farmers didn't stop with benefit concerts. Here he is, with John Mellencamp, in Washington, D.C., on June 18, 1987, during the hearings for the Agricultural Credit Act.

there to remind those gathered that there was a vital cause behind the $17.50 ticket prices. At one point, he read aloud a letter from actor James Cagney. "It all begins with the land," it said. "No farmer, no food. The survival of the country depends on the farmer."

James Cagney

Nelson also made a promise in the middle of the concert that, like most of his promises, he intended to keep. "We're going to stay with it," he told a gaggle of reporters gathered for a press conference, who asked whether this commitment to family farmers would be a one-off or a life's mission. "We're going to be working on it for a long time."

Not everyone was happy, though. Some criticized the event for being "too political," and even TNN, during the day's broadcast, twice alerted viewers that Young's onstage pressure to Congress about the Farm Bill was "the personal opinion of Neil Young," lest they offend a conservative audience. Others pointed out that the $9 million raised was quite a bit shy of the closer to $50 million Nelson hoped to make. (Farm Aid has since hit that mark.)

But Nelson kept his word. Since that September day at Memorial Stadium, Farm Aid has become an annual tradition, a nonprofit organization, a helpline (1-800-FARMAID) and a calling card that has driven much of Nelson's personal philanthropic work and turned into one of the country's best-loved festivals. It has even played a legislative role, urging Congress to pass laws like the Agricultural Credit Act of 1987, and has expanded a board of directors to include not just Nelson, Mellencamp and Young but Dave Matthews, Annie D'Angelo and Margo Price among them.

When Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, Nelson even took the opportunity to turn the 20th anniversary Farm Aid concert into emergency relief. "When something happens, it doesn't matter where it is, you have to make a decision: Do something or do nothing," Nelson said. "For me, it's that simple." —***Marissa R. Moss***

HIGH TIMES

The Highwaymen were country music's greatest supergroup.

Though many have used the term "supergroup," no one embodied it more than the Highwaymen. Joining forces after late-night jams surrounding Johnny Cash's 1984 Christmas special, Cash, Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings and Kris Kristofferson cut three albums together, logged a No. 1 hit for their Jimmy Webb-written theme song and proved the outlaw movement was less about fighting The Man than coming together for the greater creative good.

"It was founded by friendship. And it's the honesty and the purity of that friendship that made the Highwaymen stand out," John Carter Cash, son of Johnny Cash and June Carter Cash, said in 2016. "Individually, these gentlemen had their own style, their own thoughts, their own feelings, their own emotion. But they came together as friends, and that's the unifying power of the Highwaymen."

More than two decades later, singer-songwriter Amanda Shires had an idea: She would revive the spirit of the group and place it into female form alongside Brandi Carlile, Maren Morris and Natalie Hemby. The Highwomen featured a new version of the "Highwayman" anthem written for women's stories with the blessing of Webb, and their song "Crowded Table" won a Grammy. "It's not a band," Carlile told *Rolling Stone*. "It's a movement."

USA for AFRICA
United Support of Artists for Africa

1985 was a banner year for celebrity fundraisers. In January, Nelson took part in USA for Africa's "We Are the World" single, which raised $63 million in humanitarian aid for Africa.

The party never ends: Nelson, left, joins Kris Kristofferson, Waylon Jennings and Johnny Cash for a Highwaymen performance in Nashville, Tennessee, in October 1985.

On the Run Again

BUSTED BY THE IRS FOR MISSING TAXES, WILLIE NELSON GOT BACK ON HIS FEET WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM HIS FRIENDS.

Brought together by their No. 1 song "Beer for My Horses," Willie Nelson and Toby Keith perform a pregame set at the 2004 Super Bowl in Houston.

Willie Nelson had long played fast and loose with his business practices, surrounding himself with loyal but often shady associates. Those years of living dangerously finally began to catch up with him at the end of the 1980s, just as his untouchable streak on the country charts came to a close.

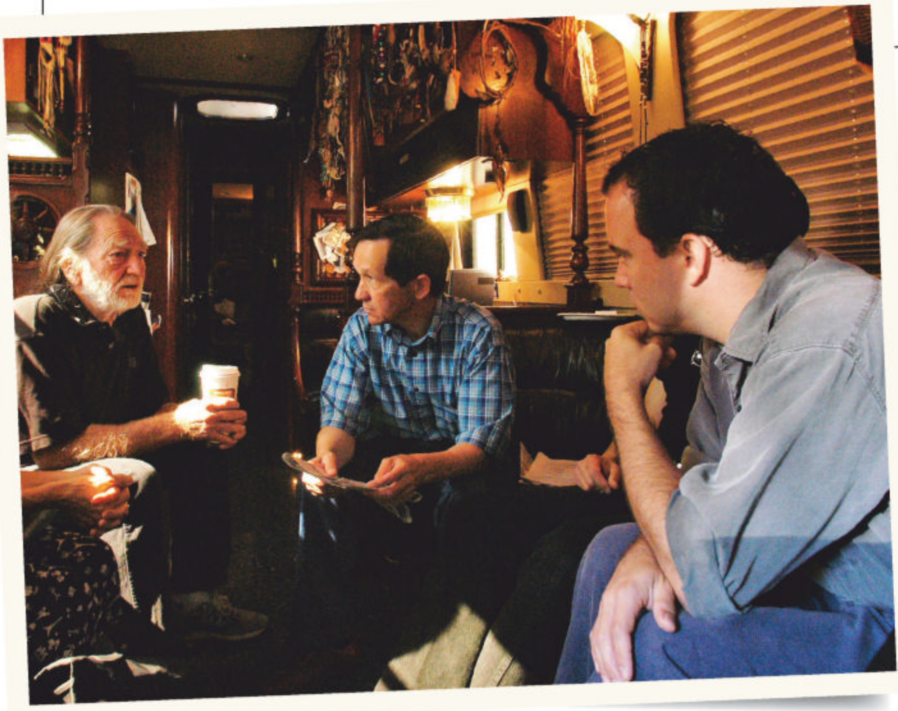
For all the star-studded crossovers that characterized the first half of the decade, Nelson, already well into his 50s, had oversaturated the market. In 1988, his busy schedule, including the release and promotion of his first autobiography and his divorce from Connie Koepke, forced the cancellation of the Fourth of July Picnic, which didn't return in earnest for seven years. The following year's *A Horse Called Music* and its No. 1 single, "Nothing I Can Do About It Now," were his last hits for more than a decade.

Then the law came down. The tax issues stemming from former manager Neil Reshen's neglect in the late '70s had only grown worse, though not for lack of trying on Nelson's part. The IRS came calling in 1980 for over $2 million in unpaid back taxes, which were made all the more suspicious by the low earnings reported from his Picnics. He and his manager, Mark Rothbaum, turned to Price-Waterhouse for recommendations on how to help pay back the missing funds. Their advice, which centered on bunk offshore investments, backfired terribly, costing Nelson another $2 million and putting him further into his hole with the feds. By 1988, they were back, now demanding $30 million. His lawyers managed to negotiate a reduction to less than half that, but Nelson never paid up. "He didn't have *1* million," daughter Lana Nelson told *Texas Monthly*. "He probably didn't have 30,000."

On Nov. 9, 1990, it all fell apart. The feds raided Luck Ranch, seizing all his assets, including master tapes, awards and even his clothes. The Texas, California and Colorado properties were taken, too. (He was allowed to keep the one in Hawaii.) Nelson, having some prior inkling of what was coming, shipped Trigger to Maui in advance, ensuring he at least didn't lose his trusty guitar.

There followed a drawn-out legal dispute in which Nelson finally came good with the government. He sold off his song catalog for a paltry $2.3 million and sued Price-Waterhouse for screwing him out of his money, settling out of court for an undisclosed sum in 1993. To close off his debts with the IRS, he shelled out $6 million outright, then released *The IRS Tapes: Who'll Buy My Memories?*, a double-CD of unreleased tracks comprised from the seized masters. In his typically haphazard way, Nelson went on TV for a fundraiser, only to wear a T-shirt with the wrong phone number printed on it.

After the raid, the IRS auctioned off the possessions it had recovered. That's when Nelson's years of generosity paid off. Friends and associates popped up to save his



Nelson chats with Dennis Kucinich and Dave Matthews on his tour bus at Farm Aid in 2003. He's used Honeysuckle Rose since the '80s.

most treasured items from falling into strangers' hands and disappearing from his life forever. Coach Darrell Royal purchased the golf course and recording studio, while a lawyer for the American Agriculture Movement bought Luck Ranch as a thank-you for Farm Aid. "I have a lot of friends," Nelson said.

There was worse in store in 1991 when his eldest son, Billy, committed suicide. Billy's struggles saw him check in and out of rehab, needing his father to bail him out of financial trouble time and again. He was living in a cabin on the back of Nelson's old property in Ridgetop, Tennessee, when he was discovered on Christmas morning, having hanged himself. Billy was 33. "I was around then, and he never mentioned it," Merle Haggard told *Rolling Stone* in 2013. "You will never see that side of him."

That year found Nelson at his lowest ebb, but it gave him the foundations to rebuild his life. A few months prior to Billy's death, the singer married Annie D'Angelo, who'd given birth to their two sons, Lukas and Micah, in 1988 and 1990, respectively. D'Angelo proved a stabilizing force, not only pushing him to live healthier but also acting as a buffer to his worst instincts, helping to squeeze out the bad actors in his business affairs. He soon returned to touring as well, having taken a hiatus while he dealt with the IRS. "We were afraid they were gonna take the door receipts for taxes, so I quit playing for a while," he said.

The climb back up was a difficult and often depressing one. Nelson and the Family booked a residency in the retirement-age tourist trap of Branson, Missouri, where they played several gigs a day to rake in cash. He then hit the road in earnest, touring with the likes of Phish and old friend Johnny Cash. His tenure with Columbia Records came to an end in 1994, at which time he began to bounce between labels, including Island, Capitol and a number of specialty jazz and folk firms in the U.S. and U.K. Gradually, he built his reputation back up, with 1996's raw *Spirit*—done solely with Nelson and sister Bobbie on piano—and 1998's *Teatro*, which saw him work with award-winning producer Daniel Lanois. There was even a children's album, *Rainbow Connection*. Though several of his records were well regarded, sales proved modest, with only three cracking the country Top 20.

Still, Nelson's legacy remained intact. He was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1993, demonstrating he'd lost none of his old humor as he joked in his acceptance speech that, "I really thought you had to die to get here." Five years later, he was awarded the Kennedy Center Honors in Washington, D.C. He also remained a unifying force: When the *America: A Tribute to Heroes* special was held days after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Nelson was tabbed to lead the grand finale sing-along of "America the Beautiful." A few months later, he played the

- Billy Nelson -

Willie Hugh Nelson Jr., better known as Billy, was Nelson's youngest child from his first marriage to Martha Matthews.

closing ceremony of the Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. Then came an unexpected hit when Toby Keith asked Nelson to join him on "Beer for My Horses." Released in April 2003, the cheeky party anthem gave him his first No. 1 in 14 years, staying there for six weeks. At age 70, Nelson was the oldest singer ever to top the country charts.

No matter how rough life had gotten in the intervening years, he had one reliable cure for his ills: playing music. "When you sing for people and they throw back all that love and energy, it's just the best medicine in the world," he said.

The Highwaymen (left to right: Nelson, Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings and Kris Kristofferson) play a benefit concert at Central Park's SummerStage on May 23, 1993.

ROADSIDE ATTRACTIONS

Willie's Place was a combination museum and truck stop in Texas.

Both before and after his IRS bust, Willie Nelson never had a shortage of products and business ventures that he was willing to slap his name on, so long as there was a chance to make a buck. One hit a little closer to home than most, however.

Willie's Place was located outside Hillsboro, Texas, a short ways from his hometown of Abbott. Opened in 2005, it was built in the shell of an old truck stop, which was first operated in 1980 as Carl's Corner by local businessman Carl Cornelius. Willie's Place continued to serve as a gas station, with the added feature of Willie Nelson Biodiesel. "This is going to be the biodiesel gorilla of the world, probably," boasted Cornelius. Nelson expanded the premises, converting the truck stop into a museum filled with his personal artifacts and adding a restaurant that specialized in Southern cuisine. There was also a concert hall that could hold 750 people and booked artists from around the country.

The truck stop launched a few short years after his own whiskey brand, Old Whiskey River, produced by Heaven Hill Distillery in Kentucky. It wasn't destined to last. Willie's Place briefly shut down for renovations and expansion, reopening in 2008, just as the world financial crisis set in. The business lasted for another three years before going into bankruptcy in 2011. The truck stop is still there and in operation, now under the more conventional auspices of a Petro Truck Stop.

WILLIE'S PLACE

The country legend opened his very own truck stop.

Partners in Crime

IN ADDITION TO HIS INDELIBLE SOLO WORK, THE LEGEND HAS AN UNMATCHED HISTORY OF DUETS. THESE ARE HIS EIGHT GREATEST.

> *"I'm hardly starstruck by anybody. [When I met] Willie, I was like, 'What do I say?'"*
>
> KACEY MUSGRAVES

Ray Price was by some measures Willie Nelson's vocal opposite. A singer's singer, Price was a smooth baritone crooner, who slathered his phrasing with romantic vibrato. Nelson, a vocal iconoclast, is an edgy jazz-inspired tenor, at once restless and totally chill. But both were Texans grounded in Western swing: Nelson had played on the singer's 1961 Bob Wills tribute while a member of Price's Cherokee Cowboys. And both men rejected distinctions between pop and country so long as the songs were good and the band swung. On their *San Antonio Rose* duet project, the Country Hall of Famers inspired one another to some of the most soul-stirring vocals of their respective careers.

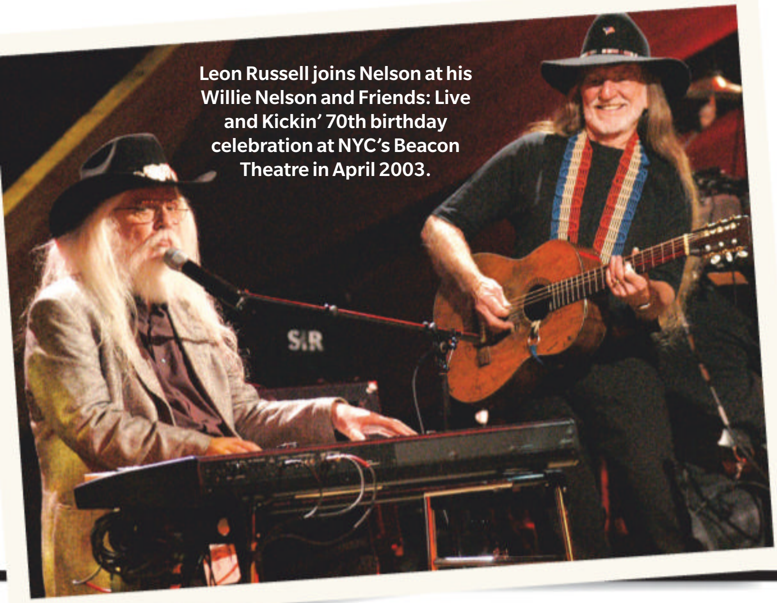
Waylon Jennings and Nelson were at the forefront of the outlaw revolution, winning the right to record what they wanted and with whom, while also kicking off one of country's most enduring crossover moments, "Luckenbach, Texas." Jennings was also the man who launched a thousand Nelson duet partners to come. Across four albums, numerous one-off tracks and countless concert appearances, the friends were a great team—and good for each other. With bon vivant Nelson at his side, Jennings' brooding individualism was tempered and more fun. And good ol' boy Waylon's country-rock thump always pulled stylist Nelson back to the outlaw basics of love.

Merle Haggard may have been Nelson's most perfect duet partner. Though these fellow road warriors scored just one radio hit together, the indelible "Pancho and Lefty" in 1983, their trio of duet albums, including Haggard's last, *Django & Jimmie* (as well as *Last of the Breed*, their release with Ray Price), are essential to any country collection. Their combined songbooks are as great as country's ever seen. Once when Haggard was feeling ambivalent about the reaction to his "Okie From Muskogee," Nelson told him he'd gladly trade "Crazy" to him for it. That's called game recognizing game.

Bobbie Nelson, his piano-playing older sister who passed away in March 2022 at age 91, was always described by Willie as the better musician in the Nelson family. The siblings teamed up, with minimal backing or none at all, on three gospel sets and *December Day* and *Spirit*, albums so spare they make *Shotgun Willie* sound fussy. Bobbie picks out the melody, or just chords along, and her simple yet stately lines ground his flights of fancy on the guitar. On the recordings, she plays straight man to baby brother's punch lines and plunks an arm around his shoulder as he weeps.

Ray Charles' lone duet with Nelson, "Seven Spanish Angels," tells a story as direct as "El Paso" and as mysterious as "Pancho and Lefty," but it's the song's melody that haunts and the texture of these two distinctly American voices, intertwined, that matters most. It's a coin toss whether the better version is the one with the Family on a 1985 Willie Nelson television special or the studio version that became Brother Ray's only No. 1 country hit the same year.

Leon Russell brought out the roadhouse blues side of Nelson like no one else. On *One for the Road*, their 1979 double LP, they play everything from show tunes to Western swingers, from country weepers to jazz standards to rock 'n' roll revivals. The first half is a shack-shaking party starter, the second a solemn and sobering morning after. But it's all a bluesy, boozy delight. Their chart-topping romp through "Heartbreak Hotel" makes down-at-the-end-of-Lonely-Street sound like where the party is.



Leon Russell joins Nelson at his Willie Nelson and Friends: Live and Kickin' 70th birthday celebration at NYC's Beacon Theatre in April 2003.

Ray Charles sang "Seven Spanish Angels" and several other songs with Nelson on *The Willie Nelson Special*.

Julio Iglesias' second Top 10 pop hit with Nelson was "Spanish Eyes," its Caribbean lilt stung ever so gently by Nelson's suggestions of Spanish guitar. But it was that record's predecessor, "To All the Girls I've Loved Before," that became a phenomenon. An international smash, the song was a not-so-humble brag fronting as gratitude. The single's chiming synths and nostalgic sweep were tailor-made for a teary rom-com montage. The result was that Nelson helped Iglesias crack open the American market to all the Latin pop to come—and propelled himself toward becoming an icon beloved by much of the world.

Kacey Musgraves is scrubbed where Nelson is scruffy. She sings like an angel where her fellow Texan's twang flies closer to the ground. But though she's still early in her career, Musgraves looks to be among the most important of Nelson's musical children. They each blend an expansive sense of genre with old-school classicism—think of their Nashville Sound-ing version of Nelson's "Are You Sure"—and they combine emotional presence with a keen, even slyly ironic, self-awareness. Oh, and on their "A Willie Nice Christmas," they agree that the holidays just wouldn't be merry if some of it wasn't spent "higher than the angel on the top of the tree." *—David Cantwell*

Willie Nelson and Sheryl Crow perform at the Johnny Cash Memorial Tribute: A Celebration of Friends and Family at Nashville's Ryman Auditorium on Nov. 15, 2003.

Renaissance Man

MORE THAN A LEGACY ACT, THE SINGER UNDERWENT A LATE-LIFE REBIRTH IN THE 21ST CENTURY.

As Willie Nelson marked his 70th birthday in April 2003, he had plenty to celebrate. He'd regained his footing from the rough and rocky traveling of the early '90s, was happier than ever in his personal life and a more commercially viable force than he had been in years. To commemorate the occasion, the USA Network set up an all-star concert at the Beacon Theatre in New York City, *Live and Kickin'*, one of a series of television specials done under the banner of *Willie Nelson & Friends*. The program included Eric Clapton, Shania Twain, Norah Jones, Steven Tyler and Toby Keith, plus old friends and collaborators like Ray Price, Ray Charles and Leon Russell. There was even a cameo by former President Bill Clinton.

Fewer and fewer of Nelson's buddies were around to join in such festivities, though. Waylon Jennings had endured years of failing health, including heart surgeries, emphysema

> "There's no one I'd rather sing with. He makes you an equal partner. It's a joy and a treat and an honor."
>
> SHERYL CROW

and diabetes, before finally succumbing to his various ailments in February 2002 at age 64. Johnny Cash was in similar decline and would pass away a few months after Nelson's birthday gala, in September 2003. Less than a year later, Charles was gone, too.

Age began to show for Nelson as well, starting with a bout of carpal tunnel syndrome that flared up in 2004. The repetitive strain of playing guitar night after night for decades on end had taken its toll and the septuagenarian was forced to get surgery, requiring him to take a four-month break from touring. "When Trigger goes, I'll quit," he'd long been known to say, but this was an especially bitter pill to swallow. A bigger scare was to come in 2012 when difficulty breathing on a trip to Colorado, the result of his own emphysema, led to the cancellation of more shows. Later stem-cell treatment helped to alleviate the issue.

Nelson, however, remained remarkably energetic. "I just like to keep moving," he told *Rolling Stone*, a fact that was reinforced by his maintaining a tour schedule of 150 or more shows a year. Besides also continuing to operate his annual Fourth of July Picnic and Farm Aid, he threw himself into new missions, including the founding of Willie Nelson Biodiesel and the sale of its BioWillie brand, which was produced at his Willie's Place truck stop in Hillsboro, Texas (see sidebar, page 77). Nelson's support of this sustainable technology included transitioning his fleet of tour buses from gasoline to vegetable-based fuel. "It seems like that's good for the whole world if we can start growing our own fuel instead of starting wars over it," he said, pointedly, in an interview with *The New York Times*. There were humanitarian causes, too, like the 2005 Austin to Asia fundraiser that he headlined to help victims of the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 and a series of similar shows held later in the year to provide disaster relief in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

As a recording artist, Nelson was as prolific as ever. He cut a reggae album; collaborated with Ringo Starr, Toots and the Maytalls and Wynton Marsalis; and reunited with Price and Merle Haggard for *Last of the Breed*, which underlined his enhanced commercial standing by climbing to No. 7 on the country chart. By this point, he was getting there regularly on his own, with 2010's *Country Music* breaking all the way into the Top 5.

Two years later, Nelson signed a deal with Legacy Recordings, a subsidiary of Sony and his old label Columbia Records, for an expansive collaboration that included new recordings as well as archival collections. The deal solidified an alliance with his new

"He'll leave a great legacy. His work will be appreciated as long as people listen to music."

KRIS KRISTOFFERSON

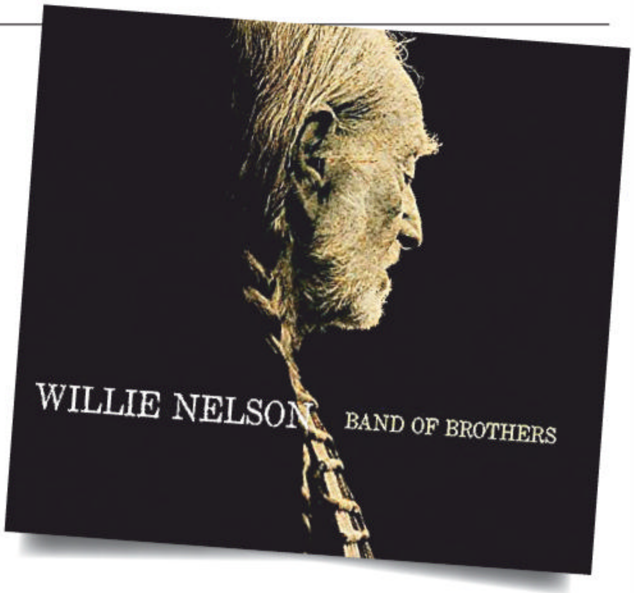
Nelson and Merle Haggard hang out at the Grammys on Jan. 24, 2014. Two years later, "The Hag" died of pneumonia. "He was my brother, my friend. I'll miss him," said Nelson.

FRIDAY
JANUARY 24, 2014
TALENT
THE 56th GRAMMYs

producer of choice, Buddy Cannon, who not only took on duties in the control booth but became Nelson's chief songwriting partner. "I love writing with Willie," said Cannon, who usually worked out lyrics with the singer via text message before tackling melodies in the studio. "He's not chasing radio; he can do whatever he wants. There's a great sense of freedom in that."

This new arrangement initially bore fruit with a duets album, *Heroes*, released in May 2012, which included Snoop Dogg, Sheryl Crow and several songs with sons Lukas and Micah. It debuted at No. 4, and was bested a year later by *To All the Girls...*, which featured an array of female singers ranging from Dolly Parton, Loretta Lynn and Brandi Carlile to Alison Krauss, Mavis Staples and Norah Jones. Daughter Paula Nelson joined her father on the penultimate track to sing Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Have You Ever Seen the Rain?" Such collaborations became a rite of passage for the latest generation of country stars, particularly artists like Miranda Lambert, Kacey Musgraves and Margo Price, who seemed best poised to carry on the ethos of their outlaw forebears.

Nelson finally produced a collection of predominantly original material for the first time in a decade and a half with *Band of Brothers* in 2014. It gave him his first No. 1 album since *The Promiseland* in 1986, further cementing his late-life renaissance. He followed this up with *Django & Jimmie*—a reprise of his and Haggard's beloved *Pancho & Lefty* LP—in 2015, and *God's Problem Child* two years after that, each of which also topped the country charts.



After 28 years without a No. 1 album, Nelson returned to the top spot in 2014 with *Band of Brothers*.

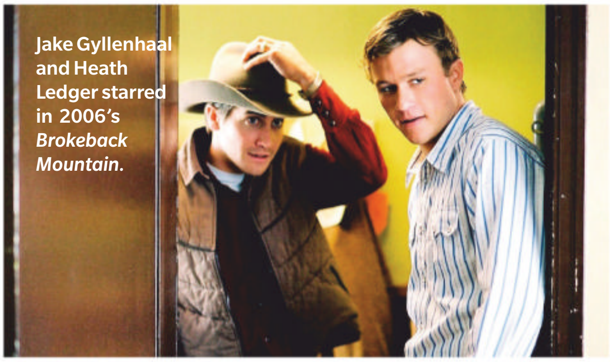
SOMEWHERE OVER THE RAINBOW

In 2006, Willie Nelson released country music's first LGBTQ-positive hit.

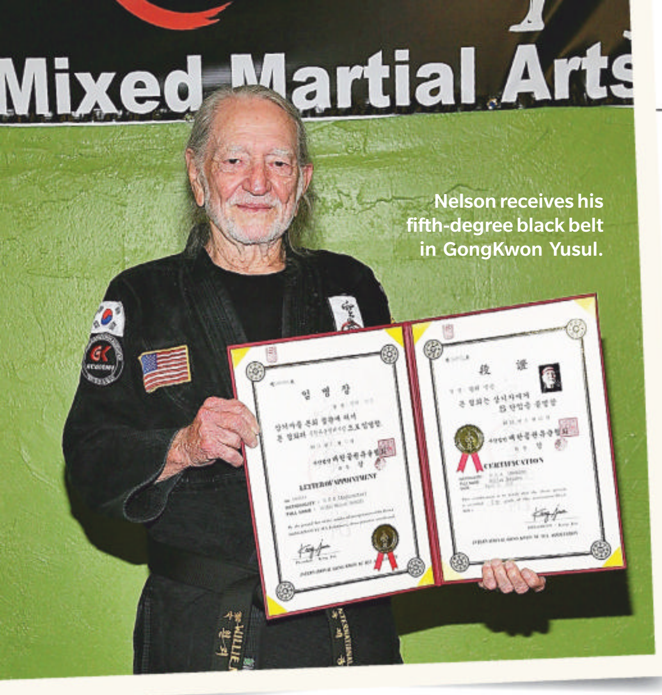
Country music has been embroiled in a series of reckonings in recent years over its lack of inclusivity, particularly toward women, people of color and artists from the LGBTQ community. Yet again, this was an area where Willie Nelson's thinking was light years ahead of the establishment.

One of his best-known bucks against the system came in 2006 when he released "Cowboys Are Frequently, Secretly Fond of Each Other," a parody of hyper-masculine cowboy culture that highlights its homoerotic undertones. The song was written and recorded by Ned Sublette in 1981, and brought to Nelson's attention a few years later. "I thought it was the funniest goddamn song I'd ever heard," he later told *Time*. It became a favorite of his to sing to friends, but it wasn't until the 2005 release of *Brokeback Mountain* (above), which included Nelson's cover of "He Was a Friend of Mine," that he decided to release his own version.

Initially it was thought the track might appear on a new album, but instead came out as a non-album digital single through the iTunes Store on Valentine's Day. Though it went nowhere with the country crowd, it was a hit with wider audiences—despite being labeled as a publicity stunt by some critics—reaching No. 52 on the *Billboard* pop chart, the highest one of his songs had gone since 1984's "To All the Girls I've Loved Before" with Julio Iglesias. Sublette himself approved. "Whoever you want to love is cool with me," Nelson said. "I've got friends who are gay, friends who are straight, and they're good friends, you know?"



Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger starred in 2006's *Brokeback Mountain.*



Nelson receives his fifth-degree black belt in GongKwon Yusul.

KARATE KID

A lifelong martial arts practitioner, he received a black belt on his 81st birthday.

Singing cowboys weren't the only childhood idols who stayed with Willie Nelson throughout his life. As a kid, he pored over issues of *Batman* and *Superman* comics and was taken by advertisements he saw for jiujitsu and judo classes. Duly intrigued, he sent in mail order forms to get instructions, and began to teach himself the basics.

When Nelson reached Nashville, Tennessee, in the '60s and had better means at his disposal, he got more serious about the practice and started formal kung fu lessons. From there he progressed to tae kwon do in the 1980s, where he went on to receive a second-degree black belt. "I think that's been a big help to me staying in shape physically," he said in 2021. "It helps my lungs, which is gonna help your singing. I think that's one reason why I've been able to keep singing, is because I've kept up with my exercises."

In the '90s, Nelson added another piece to the puzzle with the Korean GongKwon Yusul. He received a fifth-degree black belt for this in a special ceremony in Austin, Texas, on his 81st birthday, in April 2014 (above). It was revealed in a subsequent feature story in *Tae Kwon Do Times* magazine that he'd devised a special way of maintaining his lessons even while on the road, filming himself doing his routines inside the Honeysuckle Rose and then sending them to his instructor to get feedback and help improve his technique. Now that's some next-level commitment to the craft.

Miranda Lambert

Kacey Musgraves

The circumstances surrounding both albums, however triumphant, were tinged with sadness: The former marked Haggard's final recordings before he passed away in April 2016, while the latter featured a guest spot by Leon Russell that was also among his last. Mortality seemed to be an ever-present part of the conversation around Nelson's life, and was a prominent theme in his music. *God's Problem Child* dealt heavily with such material throughout its 13 songs—in particular the closing track, "He Won't Ever Be Gone," a heartfelt tribute to "The Hag." But he could also tackle the subject with his typical wry humor, as he did on 2018's *Last Man Standing* and its title track, in which he sings, "I don't want to be the last man standing / Then again, maybe I do," while listing off the growing number of his friends whom he'd lost. "You can't be afraid of dying," Nelson said, in response to these losses. "You live and you die, that's just what happens, so you can't be afraid of either."

Between these offerings, the singer recorded several albums of standards, including one of George Gershwin songs and two of Frank Sinatra's—the second of which, *That's Life*, arrived as his 71st release, in February 2021, followed by 2022's *A Beautiful Time*. Nelson also found time to write a number of new books, including a second autobiography, *It's a Long Story: My Life*, and *The Tao of Willie*; *Me and Sister Bobbie* (co-authored with his older sibling). Other recent publications include *Willie Nelson's Letters to America* (2021), the children's book *Sister, Brother, Family* (2021) and *Me and Paul* (2022). He even curated Willie's Roadhouse, his own designated channel on XM Satellite Radio, beginning in 2011.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the winter of 2020 forced Nelson once more to get off the road, but it did little to slow him down or dampen his spirit. He helped organize "A Night in Austin," a virtual benefit concert that raised nearly $700,000 in aid for his adopted hometown, and later appeared at his friend Matthew McConaughey's "We're Texas" fundraiser. In between, he, like fellow country legends Dolly Parton and Loretta Lynn, was vocal about the need to get vaccinated, going so far as to contribute a rerecording of his 1994 song "I'll Be Seeing You" to a PSA for the Ad Council and COVID Collaborative. "The good book says that this, too, shall pass," Nelson told the *New Yorker*. "And it will."

He's spoken at length throughout the years about the power of positive thinking. His friend Kinky Friedman is fond of calling Nelson the "Hillbilly Dalai Lama," while Asleep at the Wheel frontman Ray Benson compared him to Buddha. "One of the greatest things I learned from Willie Nelson is how to listen," Benson told *Texas Monthly* in 2008. "He'd be sitting in a room with all these people talking up a storm, and Willie'd be listening. Then he'd say the most intelligent, amazing thing."

It likely doesn't hurt that Nelson has lived such a full and improbable life over nine decades. He has tour dates booked through the first half of 2023, including two at the Hollywood Bowl in April to celebrate his 90th birthday. "I think I've done everything I've wanted to do and been fortunate to do it the way I wanted to do it," he reflected in an interview with The Daily Beast in February 2021. "I have no complaints about anything. I think my life's been *pretty* good."

> "There's not anything in Willie's life, I'm sure, that's as important to him as writing a song."
>
> **MERLE HAGGARD**

Margo Price looks on as Nelson performs at the 2019 edition of Farm Aid at Alpine Valley Music Theatre in Wisconsin. Of their 2017 duet on her song "Learning to Lose," Price said, "It was pretty serendipitous. He just came into the studio and he was so relaxed."

Roll Me Up and Smoke Me

NICKNAMED THE AMBASSADOR TO WEEDVILLE, HE'S ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS POTHEADS. NOW THAT HABIT IS BIG BUSINESS.

> *"Marijuana is like sex. If I don't do it every day, I get a headache. I think it should be recognized for what it is, as a medicine. If you need it, use it."*
>
> **WILLIE NELSON**

GUIDE TO BREEDING BETTER BUDS
HIGH TIMES
HIGH TIMES
WILLIE ON WEED
PLUS: BOB DYLAN DROPS IN!
HUGE HARVEST IN SMALL SPACES
CANADA'S BEST POT
TOP 10 STONER COLLEGES

Willie Nelson, who appeared on the cover of *High Times* in 2005, once said, "I wouldn't be alive [without marijuana]. It saved my life, really."

The headlines about Willie Nelson in December 2019 seemed scarcely believable. From NBC to CNN to *USA Today*, the news was much the same: "Willie Nelson Has Stopped Smoking Weed," they trumpeted. "I have abused my lungs quite a bit in the past," he was quoted as saying in an interview with San Antonio TV station KSAT. "I don't smoke anymore. I take better care of myself today."

Nelson, the most famous pot smoker on Earth, finally issued a clarification: He hadn't given up weed entirely, only smoking it. There were still gummies, vapes and a whole variety of other ways for him to consume it—courtesy, of course, of his own brand, Willie's Reserve. "Willie does what he wants, when he wants," his publicist insisted. The world breathed a wheezing sigh of relief.

Barely six months prior, the singer had appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone*, declaring, "[Marijuana] saved my life." It wasn't so far fetched. Back in 1981, he'd suffered a collapsed lung while swimming at his home in Maui. Years of heavy drinking and cigarette smoking—as many as two to three packs a day—had done considerable damage. After enduring repeated bouts of pneumonia, Nelson gave up both in favor of weed. "I wouldn't have lived 85 years if I'd continued drinking and smoking like I was when I was 30, 40 years old," he said. Since then, the drug had become a part of his very being. "When he smokes weed, you can't even tell it," said drummer Paul English. "He says, 'I don't smoke weed to get high, I smoke weed to get normal.'"

WHAT do you STAND FOR?
WILLIE'S RESERVE
WILLIE'S RESERVE
PINEAPPLE RISING
GROWN BY ELYSIAN FIELDS
1 GRAM PRE-ROLL
POWERED BY FLOW KANA
BERRY WHITE
GROWN BY WATER DOG HERB FARM
1/2 GRAM PRE-ROLLS
BELL SPRINGS
CA

Willie's Reserve was launched in March 2015. Today, it sells products ranging from joints to vapes to edibles to coffee, the last of which is known as Willie's Remedy.

Nelson, as so many people around the world know him best: lighting up a fat one, a tray of weed before him, hair braided and coffee cup emblazoned with the flag of Texas.

"When I quit drinking [alcohol] and quit smoking cigarettes, a lot of my problems went away."

WILLIE NELSON

Nelson wasn't so picky about what he put in his body when he was growing up. As a kid in Abbott, Texas, the first thing he smoked was a piece of cedar bark. Then came cigarettes. Weed popped up in his 20s, when he was working at a radio station in Fort Worth, Texas, and a fellow musician offered him a joint. "The U.S. government…said I would go crazy and stick up a bank…murder innocent people," he wrote in *Willie: An Autobiography*. That first time he tried it, he didn't feel much, but he kept at it, eventually finding a smoking buddy in Ray Price when he reached Nashville.

The other habits he developed weren't so kind to him, especially alcohol. In one oft-related episode during the '60s, a despondent Nelson once laid himself out in the middle of Broadway in downtown Nashville hoping to get run over. "Used to be the biggest problem he had was drinking," English told *Texas Monthly*. "Back when he drank, the first thing he wanted to do was drive a car. I would chase him down and try to get the keys away from him." After returning to Texas in the early '70s, he experimented more freely with other substances, including amphetamines, cocaine and psychedelics. "In the fairly short period of time that I used it, acid taught me several profound things," he wrote. "One was that I must not take acid and try to play a show."

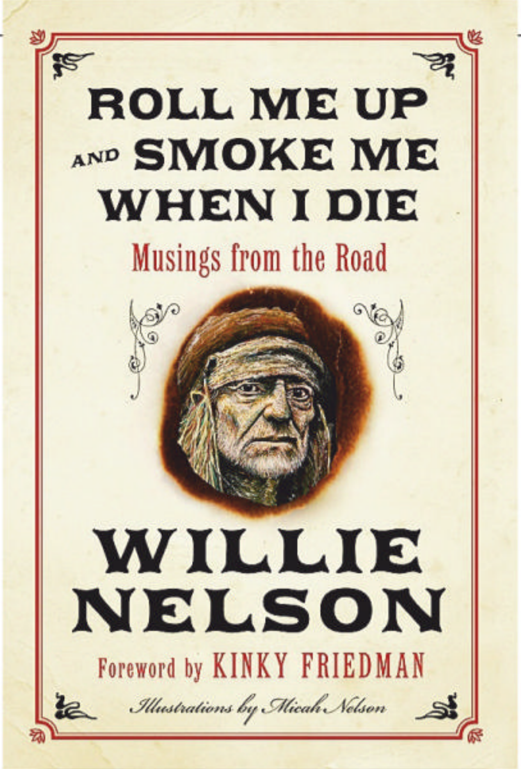
His bandmates were more enthusiastic in their consumption, at one point abiding by a motto of "No Blow, No Show" until Nelson finally put his foot down. "It took a while, but reality eventually set in," bassist Bee Spears told Joe Nick Patoski in *An Epic Life: Willie Nelson*. "People started getting popped for [cocaine], people started dying, you'd pull an all-nighter and you didn't bounce back, you'd be sick for three or four days, so it wasn't cool, it wasn't worth it."

Weed, however, remained a reliable companion. Despite his many busts for possession (see sidebar, page 44), Nelson never gave it up, doubling down on its merits as a medicinal substance that shouldn't be criminalized. He became a board member for the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws, and in 2005 hosted a benefit golf game at his Pedernales course to raise funds, which became an annual event. His ubiquity as a smoker was such that it became a running pop culture punch line, leading to a memorable cameo in the 1998 stoner flick *Half Baked*. ("It wasn't the thing to do because it was the thing to do, you know? It was the thing to do because it got you high," his character says.)

With the push for legalization gaining steam after the first U.S. states allowed its recreational use in 2012, Nelson began to put his money where his mouthpiece was. In 2015, he announced the launch of Willie's Reserve, his own brand of commercial marijuana. "I've bought a lot of pot in my life," he told *GQ* that summer, "and now I'm selling it back." Like many of his latter-day projects, the company was a close collaboration between Nelson and his wife, Annie D'Angelo, and maintained the precedent of using locally sourced goods that helped small, independent farmers.

Navigating the laws proved a convoluted affair, as they varied from state to state, even among those where its sale was no longer prohibited. But there was big money to be made in the new boom, and Nelson's early embrace of the burgeoning industry gave it instant credibility. Willie's Reserve was marketed as coming from his personal stash, with his official title being CTO, or "Corporate Taste Officer." Each strain released by the company was said to go through him for his own trial and approval. He also got his friends involved, including Margo Price, who was given her own strain called All American Made. "It was like, 'Guys, some [musicians] want to sell clothes on the Home Shopping Network, but I want to sell weed,'" Price told *High Times* in 2018. "I just wanted to do it legally this time."

Ironically, Nelson was not known to be much of a connoisseur; when it came to cannabis, he loved all comers. "He's kind of a sativa dude," D'Angelo observed. "He's already funny, so it just makes him funnier. " If anything, he found satisfaction in seeing weed become another piece of his storied legacy. "It's nice to watch it being accepted— knowing you were right all the time about it," he said.



Released in 2012, Nelson's memoir *Roll Me Up and Smoke Me When I Die* was a *New York Times* bestseller. Three years later, he and Merle Haggard recorded "It's All Going to Pot" in much the same vein.

SMOKING WEED WITH WILLIE

The tales of those who got high with him and lived to talk about it.

More than being one of country music's most iconic songwriters, Willie Nelson is perhaps the world's greatest pot smoker. The tales of those who took even one hit off his legendary bomber-sized joints and struggled to handle it are endless—and many have bowed to his skills.

Noted pot enthusiast Snoop Dogg spoke at length about getting smoked under the table by Nelson during his South by Southwest keynote speech in 2015 (right), which culminated in the pair going to the KFC drive-thru. "That was one of the greatest moments of my life," the rapper recalled. Comedian and actor Chelsea Handler said of her own first encounter with Nelson's stash, "I was high for two days. I literally couldn't open one of my eyes."

Nelson's weed smoking has also been immortalized in song several times over. Most famously, Toby Keith's "Weed With Willie" from 2003 provides a humorous account of lighting up with Nelson before a night out in Las Vegas, which features the memorable refrain, "I'll never smoke weed with Willie again." In 2018, Jack Johnson released a song called "Willie Got Me Stoned" that chronicles a weed and gambling binge that emptied out the younger singer's wallet. "It probably didn't help that I couldn't remember my name," sings Johnson.

With the world in COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, Nelson decided to let others in on the fun with his "Come and Toke It" livestream, a four-hour-and-20-minute online variety show held on 4/20. It was all for a good cause, too, with proceeds going to the Last Prisoner Project restorative justice program.

Snoop Dogg

All in the Family

FOR MORE THAN A HALF CENTURY, WILLIE NELSON HAS PLAYED WITH A BACKING BAND THAT'S FAMILIAL IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE.

> *"As a depiction of people coming together, I like the term 'family' more than 'band.' It's a warmer word that suggests genuine care and love."*
>
> **WILLIE NELSON**

The first song Lukas Nelson (left) ever wrote, "You Were It," was recorded by Willie for his 2004 album *It Will Always Be.*

There aren't many surprises to be found these days in a Willie Nelson concert. Backed by the same band for more than 50 years, and armed with an arsenal of hits that rivals anyone's in popular music, his live shows are honed to a formula that doesn't need much tweaking. "Once, we got him to change the set, but the crowd turned on us. They wanted us to play the hits," harmonica player Mickey Raphael said in 2008.

Nelson's band has existed under the guise of the Family since 1973, though it can be traced back at least as far as the mid-1960s with the formation of the Record Men. Drummer Paul English and bassist Bee Spears carried over from that prior incarnation. The only remaining member from the original Family is Mickey Raphael, but the early lineup, complete with dual drummers and dual bass players, was mighty—a tough, rocking ensemble fueled by an expensive cocaine habit. 1978's double-LP *Willie and Family Live* catches them at their breakneck best. Even today, the singer keeps his bandmates on their toes. "Playing with Willie is tricky business," Spears

Willie and Bobbie Nelson (above) shared a unique musical bond. "She seems to know what I'm going to play before I do," he once said.

told the *Austin American Statesman* in 2003. "If you try to follow him too close, he'll lead you down to the river and drown you. You have to keep one eye on him and one eye on your part."

Though members came and went over the years, with Rex Ludwig, Chris Ethridge and Grady Martin serving stints between the '70s and '90s, the core ones rarely left the fold. Billy English joined his brother on drums and percussion in 1983, a role he's held ever since. Spears and the other founding Family member, guitarist Jody Payne, played with Nelson until or close to their deaths, in 2011 and 2013, respectively; sister Bobbie Nelson played piano from 1973 to 2021 (she died in March 2022). By the turn of the century, the Family took on greater meaning when sons Lukas and Micah Nelson, then barely in their teens, joined along. "I'd absorbed so many songs since I was a baby. I paid attention. I loved the music," Lukas told the *Evening Standard* in 2019.

The two brothers played in various bands together growing up, including 40 Points—which was signed to their father's Pedernales Records—before Lukas went to college in Los Angeles. While there, he formed Promise of the Real, who were hired as Neil Young's backing band and recorded *The Monsanto Years* with him in 2015. Promise of the Real achieved their own breakthrough two years later with the release of an acclaimed self-titled record, which Lukas followed up a year later by helping write the Grammy-winning soundtrack to *A Star Is Born,* starring Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper. Micah continued to play an intermittent role with his brother's work, but also branched out into his own projects. Today he splits his time primarily between the solo act Particle Kid and the psych-folk band Insects vs. Robots.

Lukas and Micah shared the billing with their dad in 2017 on *Willie Nelson and the Boys,* a collection of country standards. "Luke's guitar playing, I hear a lot of my licks coming back at me a lot better than they went out," a proud Nelson told *Rolling Stone* at the time. "Micah's a great musician, he plays everything. You know, he can play a fiddle bow on a guitar and make it sound pretty cool. We're lucky. They're really good musicians."

The family connection isn't limited to his two youngest sons, either. Sisters Paula and Amy, from Nelson's third marriage, both wound up in the music business, with Paula hosting two shows on SiriusXM Radio's Outlaw Country and Willie's Roadhouse channels, while Amy is one half of the duo Folk Uke with Cathy Guthrie, the daughter of another famous musician, Arlo Guthrie. The pair have released nine albums since forming in San Diego in the late '90s. At least one member of the next generation of Nelsons, Willie's granddaughter Raelyn, has also pursued a career in music. The daughter of his late son Billy fronts the Raelyn Nelson Band and, like Amy, is a ukulele player.

All these branches of the Nelson clan have continued to come under the same tent, particularly as the patriarch expanded his festival footprint beyond the Fourth of July Picnic with the Luck Reunion and the Outlaw Music Series, each of which regularly featured his offspring on the bills. "It's [always] been a family thing with me, just making music with whoever was around. To have your kids up there doing a good job with you, now that's as good as it gets," Nelson said.

Micah Nelson

Paula Nelson

Raelyn Nelson

Amy Nelson

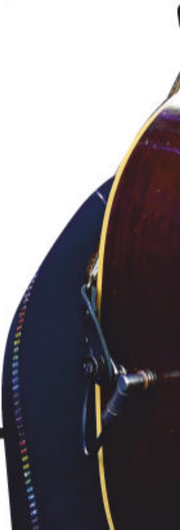
We're the Best of Friends

SHOTGUN WILLIE HAS AFFECTED PEOPLE IN ALL WALKS OF LIFE. HERE'S WHAT SOME OF HIS FAMOUS PALS AND ADMIRERS HAVE TO SAY ABOUT HIM.

"One of my very favorites is Willie Nelson. We showed up in Nashville about the same time, we both wrote for the same publishing company, for Combine Music and Monument Records. We used to sit down in this basement and write songs, separately and together. And he was writing all these wonderful hits and I loved everything he did. I thought, he's such a stylist."

Dolly Parton

"Growing up in Texas, there is no bigger icon than Willie Nelson. Saying you know Willie Nelson is like saying you know Clint Eastwood or something." **OWEN WILSON**



"We were chilling in Willie's room, and we were playing dominoes. He's whooping my ass at dominoes, but at the same time he's passing me a paper, a cigar, a vape, a bong and a little Volcano. So I'm like, 'This old man is really trying to challenge me right now!'" **Snoop Dogg**

"I don't have a favorite song that I've written. But I do have a favorite song: 'Always on My Mind,' the Willie Nelson version. If I could sing like him, I would sing it every night."

B.B. KING

"I wanted to be Willie Nelson's girlfriend. Which was a little weird for a 9-year-old. I'm still waiting on you, Willie."

REESE WITHERSPOON

"He kicks our ass. He stays up all night partying and gambling. I mean, he's got reserves behind reserves of energy. It's just shocking. And he's one of the funniest people alive."

WOODY HARRELSON

"His songs, they're so iconic, they're so classic. They're never gonna die. And let's get real. He's probably not either. He's going to outlive us all."

KACEY MUSGRAVES

"You never get to know him like you should, but you know there's more there than what you're seeing. I know there's more there because of how he writes. He can't fool me!" **Loretta Lynn**

"He came out like that. He's been that way all of his life, ever since I've known him. I met him sometime in the early '60s, probably '63, '64, and he's always been I guess what people would describe as a rebel. He just does things his own way, and not the way that they're being done."

MERLE HAGGARD

"Willie and I are great friends. We always will be. He gets mad at me and I get mad at him, but we made a pact a long time ago. Most of our trouble has been caused by people around us, not between me and him. Before we get mad enough to kill one another we'll talk about it first." **Waylon Jennings**

Nelson by the Numbers

THE FACTS AND FIGURES THAT SUM UP THE COUNTRY LEGEND.

> *"I live one day at a time. I don't worry about yesterday and I'm not concerned much with tomorrow."*
>
> WILLIE NELSON

Willie Nelson presents President Jimmy Carter with a gold record for *Stardust* at the White House in 1979.

$24 MILLION

The estimated net worth of the 90-year-old.

25

THE SUM TOTAL OF NO. 1 SINGLES BY THE RED HEADED STRANGER, INCLUDING SOLO AND COLLABORATIVE PERFORMANCES.

13

How many books Nelson has authored or co-authored, including autobiographies, memoirs and a Christmas book.

PRETTY PAPER
A CHRISTMAS TALE
WILLIE NELSON

15

THE NUMBER OF GRAMMY AWARDS NELSON HAS RECEIVED, INCLUDING LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AND LEGENDS HONORS.

40 MILLION

The amount of albums Nelson has sold in the United States alone.

Nelson lays down a vocal track inside RCA's Studio B in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1965.

67 YEARS

The span of time Nelson has spent as a recording artist.

540 WEEKS

How long the *Stardust* LP spent continuously on the country music charts after its release.

WILLIE NELSON
TEXAS WILLIE

98

The number of studio albums Nelson has released since making his full-length debut in 1962.

A NUMBER ANY SELF-RESPECTING POTHEAD KNOWS IS SYNONYMOUS WITH NELSON.

420

Ultimate Willie

Do you recognize this man? A fresh-faced Willie Nelson sports a grin and fringe in a publicity photo early in his career.

1. How old was Willie Nelson when he wrote his first song?

A. 5
B. 6
C. 7
D. 9

2. Which of these jobs did Nelson not work?

A. Phone operator
B. Gravedigger
C. Dishwasher
D. Saddle maker

3. Who did Nelson once beat out of $40,000 playing poker?

A. Matthew McConaughey
B. Owen Wilson
C. Jack Johnson
D. Woody Harrelson

4. Who inducted Nelson into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1993?

A. Waylon Jennings
B. Johnny Cash
C. Merle Haggard
D. Harlon Howard

5. What was Nelson's college major?

A. Music
B. English
C. Business
D. Agriculture

6. What is Nelson's middle name?

A. Arlyn
B. Hugh
C. Lukas
D. Alfred

7. On Nelson's birth certificate, what date was incorrectly recorded?

A. April 20
B. April 29
C. April 30
D. May 1

8. Who was the first person to sign Trigger?

A. Gene Autry
B. Leon Russell
C. Kris Kristofferson
D. Roger Miller

9. What position did Nelson play on his high school football team?

A. Quarterback
B. Halfback
C. Running back
D. Wide receiver

10. What was the name of the first song Nelson released?

A. "Family Bible"
B. "The Record Man"
C. "No Place for Me"
D. "Night Life"

11. Which branch of the military did Nelson serve in?

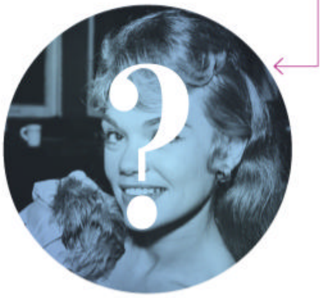
A. Air Force
B. Army
C. National Guard
D. Navy

12. How many years have Nelson's Fourth of July Picnics been held?

A. 35
B. 38
C. 39
D. 40

13. Who claimed never to have heard of Nelson prior to their working together on a motion picture?

A. Jane Fonda
B. Cloris Leachman
C. Dyan Cannon
D. Jessica Simpson



Nelson Quiz

TEST YOUR SMARTS ABOUT THE RED HEADED STRANGER.

14. Which artist has Nelson never recorded a tribute album to?
A. Lefty Frizzell
B. George Gershwin
C. Kris Kristofferson
D. Django Reinhardt

15. What was the name of the street where the Austin Opry House was located?
A. Congress Avenue
B. Sixth Street
C. Red River
D. Academy Drive

Sports were Nelson's favorite part of school. "I never did think losing was a lot of fun," he said.

Doctor Feelgood: Nelson looked professional as he received his honorary doctorate degree on May 11, 2013.

16. Who appears with Nelson on the cover of *The Words Don't Fit the Picture*?
A. Shirley Collie
B. Bobbie Nelson
C. Waylon Jennings
D. Connie Koepke

17. For whom did Nelson serve as a character witness during a courtroom trial?
A. Billy Joe Shaver
B. Paul English
C. Dennis Hopper
D. Snoop Dogg

18. The original title of "Crazy" was "Stupid."
True or False?

19. From which school did Nelson receive an honorary doctorate degree?
A. Berklee College of Music
B. University of Texas
C. Vanderbilt University
D. The Juilliard School

20. How much money did Nelson earn from his first paying gig?
A. $5
B. $6
C. $8
D. $10

ANSWERS **1.** C, **2.** B, **3.** D, **4.** B, **5.** D, **6.** B, **7.** C, **8.** B, **9.** B, **10.** C, **11.** A, **12.** B, **13.** C, **14.** D, **15.** D, **16.** D, **17.** A, **18.** True, **19.** A, **20.** C

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WILLIE NELSON

The King of Country

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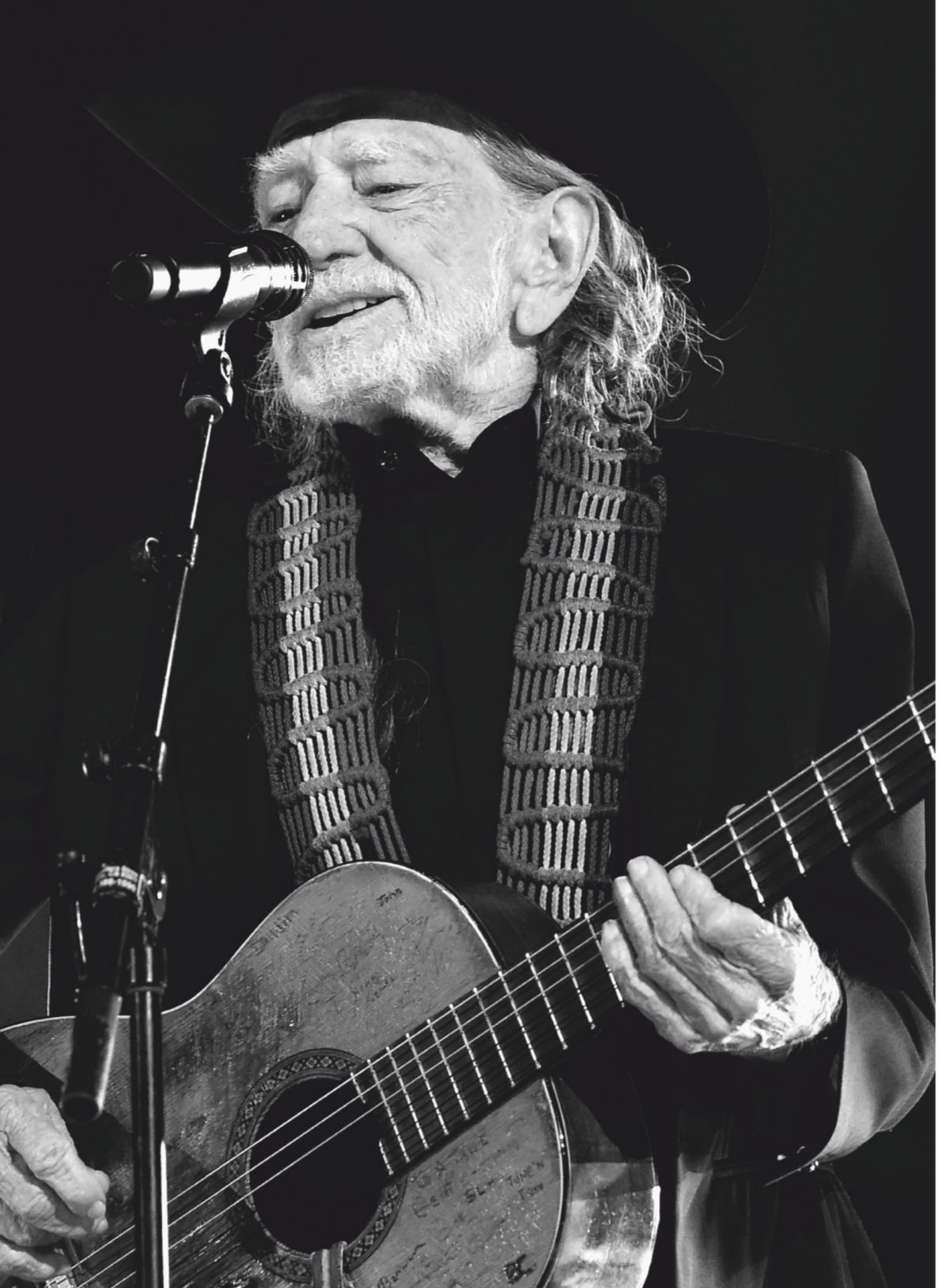
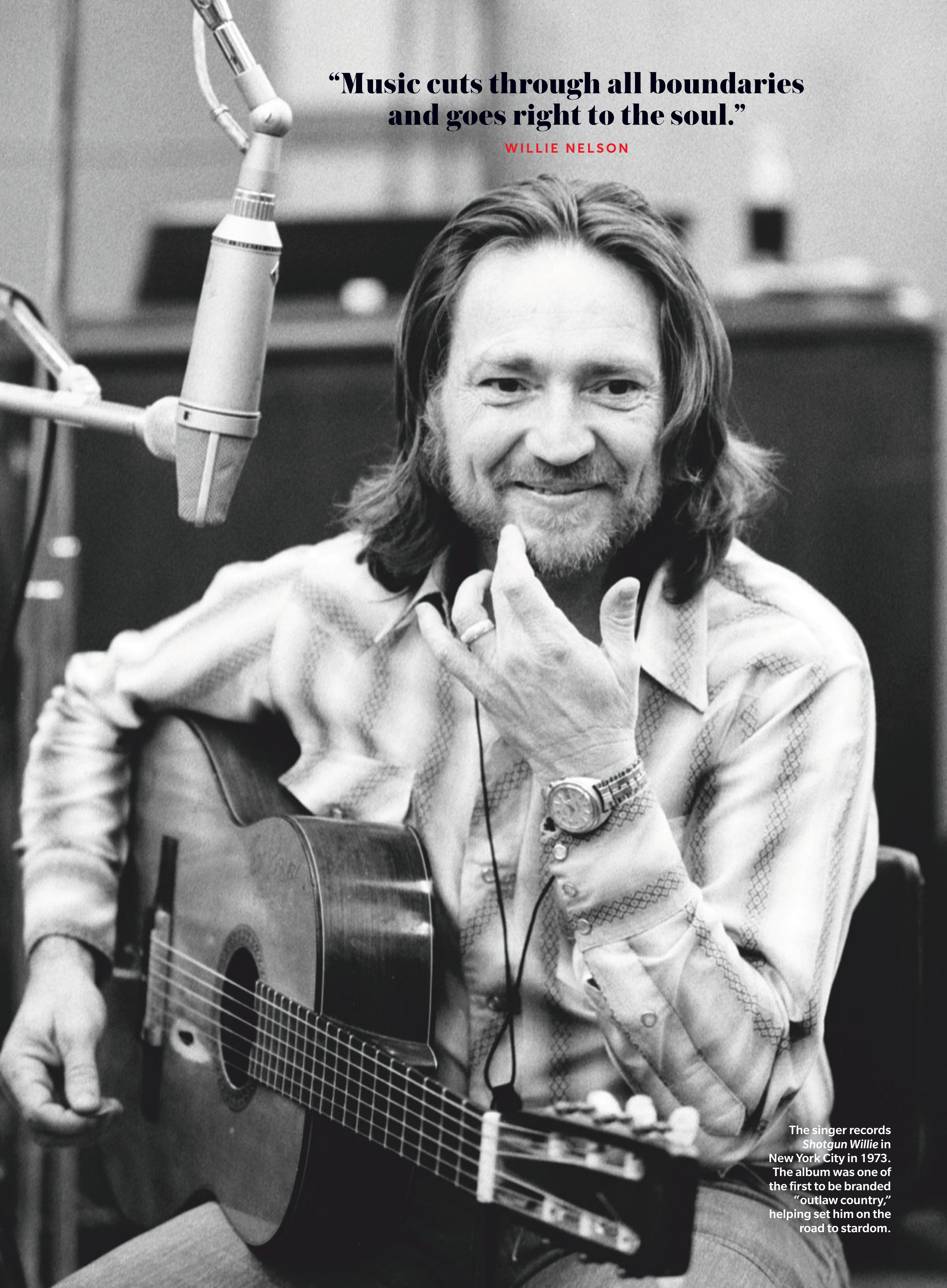
Willie Nelson has played his guitar Trigger (including this 2019 performance honoring Dolly Parton as MusiCares Person of the Year) in more than 10,000 shows.



> **“Music cuts through all boundaries and goes right to the soul.”**
>
> WILLIE NELSON



The singer records *Shotgun Willie* in New York City in 1973. The album was one of the first to be branded “outlaw country,” helping set him on the road to stardom.